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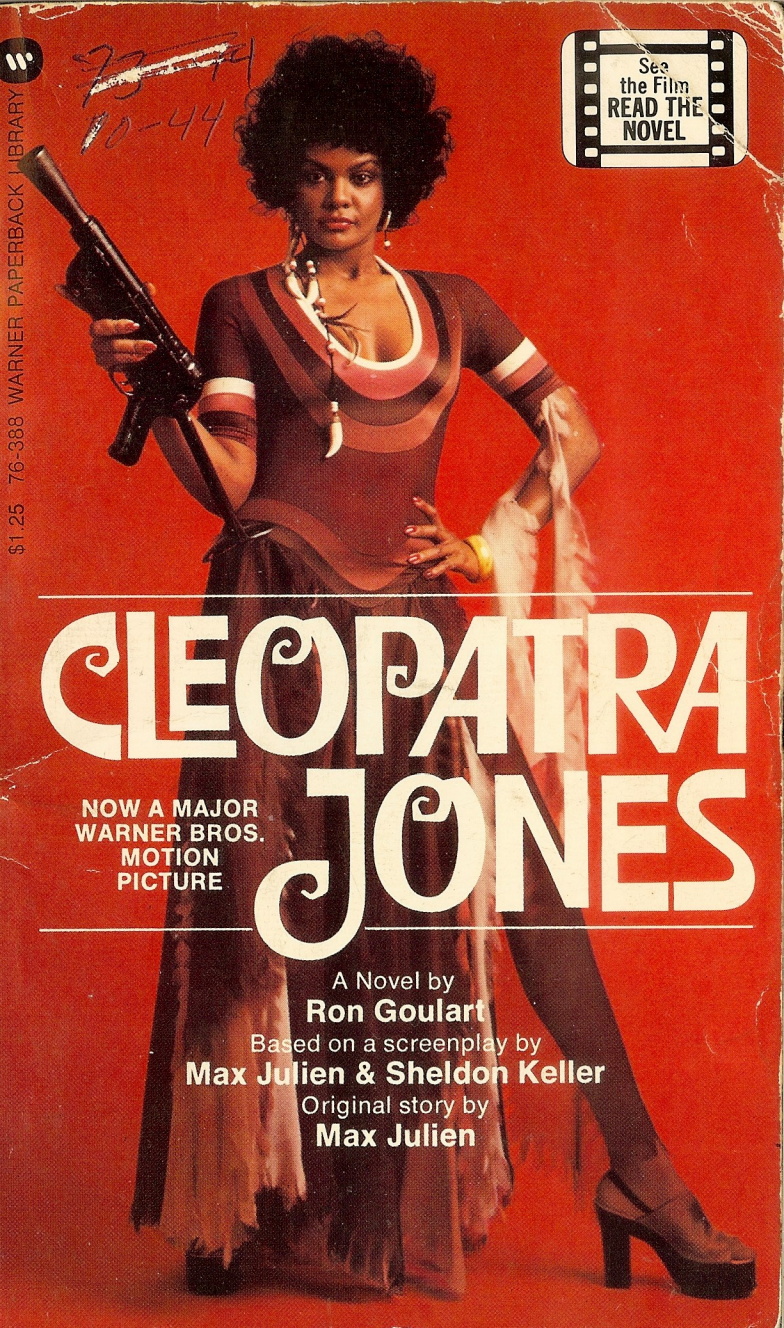

CLEOPATRA JONES

NOW A MAJOR WARNER BROS. MOTION PICTURE

A Novel by
Ron Goulart
Based on a screenplay by
Max Julien & Sheldon Keller
Original story by
Max Julien

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"THIRTY MILLION DOLLARS UP IN SMOKE! GOD DAMN HER!"

Mommy, the jack-booted she-boss of the "horse" racket was screaming. Cleopatra Jones had won a victory when she burnt up that opium field in Turkey, but she had also won a vicious enemy. Already Mommy's demented mind was scheming.

There would be an ambush when Cleo stepped off the plane from Turkey—she'd have a six-gun salute, all right! And that little Synanon Cleo was sponsoring to help cure addicts—there'd be a "bust" over there when Mommy's police payrollers slammed into action. It was only the beginning of the all-out onslaught Mommy could stack against that sexy super-narc . . .

But, watch out, Mommy, it will take a lot more to finish off the "baddest" black agent who ever wiggled a hip holster!

See Tamara Dobson as Cleo

Shelley Winters as Mommy

in

CLEOPATRA JONES

A Warner Bros. Production

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A Warner Communications Company

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One

Before the planes flew over, there was a twilight silence filling the vast poppy field. A warm gentle wind, blowing in from the direction of the not distant Mediterranean, flickered the thousands of red blossoms. As the low hills above the field began to darken, a scattering of large crows flapped up into the air and went circling toward the east. Great streamers of orange streaked the sky.

"What a waste," murmured Lt. Ahmet Etmek in his native Turkish. "What a waste."

Capt. Suszluk elbowed him. "Nix," he cautioned in Turkish. "Our government wishes us to be cooperative, remember?" He adjusted his black beret and turned a bland face toward the other men gathered with them on the bare hillside above the sweeping field of opium poppies.

There were four jeeps, a Landrover and a silver

Jaguar parked at the end of the narrow, dusty road leading in here. Nine other men stood in various positions nearby, relaxed for the most part, but expectant. Five of these men were in the uniforms of the national police of various countries; four were in civilian clothes. All of them had an official aura about them.

Mayhew, the man from London, was leaning against the side of his Jaguar. A tall sinewy man in a trenchcoat, arms folded. He was the first one to hear the approaching helicopter. Grinning, he shaded his eyes with one knobby hand and looked up into the intensely orange sunset.

The chopper made an even chuffing sound as it approached. At first it was only a small black silhouette against the waning day. Rapidly it grew larger and larger.

"Gloating," said Lt. Etmek.

"What?" His superior officer began to fiddle with the walkie-talkie he'd been holding at his side.

"*She's* gloating up there."

"You can't even see her yet."

"But I know of what I say," Etmek assured Suszluk.

The copter hovered directly above, then commenced dropping down. It produced a strong dry wind that sent dust swirling.

The instant the ship landed, plexiglass fuselage popped open. One impressively long leg emerged out into the thinning light.

There was an appreciative exhalation from several of the gathered police officials.

The girl who emerged from the chopper was tall and black, long-legged, her hair worn Afro style. She was dressed in a taut-fitting leather pants suit and

airforce-type dark glasses. The leather jacket was open, showing the scoop-necked body shirt beneath. When she bent to duck out of the ship, her two large upright breasts smacked together softly.

The Italian policeman, in silk plainclothes, jogged up to help the tall, lovely black girl to the ground. "Buona sera, Signorina Jones," he smiled. He placed one hand under her elbow, the other on her leather-covered left buttock.

"Hot-blooded as ever, huh, Carlo?" she replied in faultless Italian. She flicked her backside and his hand flapped away.

Captain Suszluk made his way to her side, saying in Turkish. "Everything is ready, Miss Jones."

"Thank you, Captain," replied the long black girl in the same tongue.

A Greek lawman started to reach out to shake hands with her, thought better of it, and simply called out in Greek, "How are you, Miss Jones?"

"Splendid, Niklos," she responded in fluent greek. She smiled a broad smile at him.

She walked, with her highly personalized stride, away from the now silent chopper. Each of the other police officials she greeted in his own language.

Stopping in front of the sad-faced Lt. Etmek, she lifted her dark glasses for an instant to roll her eyes at him. "Cheer up, Ahmet. Tell your uncle he'll simply have to practice crop rotation now."

When she reached Mayhew, the British agent said, "You're looking magnificent, Cleo."

Cleopatra Jones raised one eyebrow. "More of that British understatement?"

Mayhew took her hand. "Really, Cleo, you're get-

ting quite bigoted. First you accuse poor Carlo of being a stereotyped hot-blooded Italian and. . . ."

"Anybody who pats my ass, I figure he's not suffering from tired blood," she said, drily. Turning, she gazed out at the poppy field. Darkness was seeping down out of the sky, filling the rows of flowers with shadows. "I'm glad you got us seats on the fifty-yard line."

Mayhew watched the poppy field with her. "Well, it's all happening, isn't it?"

"Mmm," Cleo said, smiling faintly. "Finally."

"It would have brought," said the British agent, "at least thirty million dollars on the street."

The smile snapped off her lovely face. "Thirty million dollars' worth of shit," she said, "that ain't going into no kids' arms."

Captain Suszluk trotted over, the walkie-talkie pressed to his cheek. "All is in readiness, Miss Jones."

The tall black girl stood watching the silent poppy field for nearly a minute. It was almost night now. In a low, even voice she said, "Burn it."

Into the walkie-talkie the Turkish captain repeated, "Burn it!"

The silence held for another long minute.

Then from over the dark blue hills four sharp-nosed jets came roaring.

The planes flew low across the poppy field, like some kind of hyped-up cropdusters. Something came tumbling down from the streaking jets. As they went curving upward into the blackness of the sky a great whumping sound rumbled over the poppy field. The dropped napalm began working and the whole enormous flower bed was a blazing spread of flame. As

smoke and intense heat spewed up, a great glare bathed the observers.

Some of them, unconsciously, backed away.

But Cleo stood her ground. "One more down," she said. A smile touched her face again.

Two

Adolph Hitler rocked from side to side.

The enormous redheaded woman in the pin-stripe suit and jack boots continued to pound the dark-stained wall of her huge den. "That bitch," she repeated in her rasping voice.

The giant oil painting of Hitler hanging high on the wall swayed back and forth.

"That goddamn black bitch," continued the enormous woman.

A fragile, pretty young girl with long honey-blonde hair moved silently across the room toward the massive mahogany desk. She was wearing a sleeveless see-through singlet, tight maize-colored pants, and boots. With one slender hand she reeled up the dangling phone receiver and recradled it. "The phone company doesn't like you to use strong language over the phone, Mommy," she said in her husky but polite voice.

"Screw the phone company," said Mommy, brushing down her fluffy red hair.

"Honestly, Mother," said the unobtrusive young man seated next to the lamp with a World War II German shellcase for its base. He was the only one of the four other persons in the room who was her actual kin.

Mommy ignored him, snorted, and began slapping her swagger stick against her vast right thigh. "Thirty or forty million bucks, all up in smoke," she said. "Forty million bucks, and all because of that goddamn spade bitch."

As she went stalking across the thick rug she brushed against a small weathered man who was huddled in a big leather armchair cleaning a telescopic rifle. "Excuse it," he said.

"Stop futzing with that thing, Zap," bellowed Mommy.

"I might have to use it any time," replied the little Zap. "So I like to . . ."

She took a swat at him with her swagger stick. "And I don't like sass, Zap. People who got someplace in this world—people such as Albert Speer, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and Wilhelm Ohnesorge—they weren't noted for taking a lot of sass."

"Excuse it."

Mommy stalked on, stopping in front of the other man in the room. He was nearly as heavyset as she was, with shoulder-length hair, three flashing jeweled rings on his left hand, and a bright gold zodiac medallion showing through his net shirt. "You have a terrible posture, Baby Tony," the big woman told him.

"It's actually because I have such massive shoul-

ders," Baby Tony explained. "You should see what trouble I have whenever . . ."

"Silence, silence," said Mommy. "You can be sure Joseph Goebbels had all the respectful silence he needed whenever he needed to think."

"And look where he is today," said her son, Bruce, crossing his legs in the opposite way from the way they'd been crossed.

His mother ignored him. She glanced at the portrait of Hitler and took a deep breath. She went and sat in a raised throne-like chair. Looking down at them, she said, "She's not going to stop with that one field. She's screwed up other people's sources of supply, and now she's messing with mine. If she isn't stopped, she'll cremate every frigging poppy in Turkey."

The pretty, fragile Eva appeared at her side holding a small glass of brandy on a silver tray. "Here, this will calm your nerves."

The scowl left Mommy's face for a moment. She accepted the proffered drink, stroking Eva's hand as she did. After a sip of brandy, she said, "That damn Cleopatra bitch will keep up until she cuts off all my sources in Turkey."

"You'll still have Thailand," pointed out Bruce.

"Who's to say that interfering jigaboo won't hit there next?" said Mommy. "No, as long as she's over in the Middle East nothing is going to get through." She pounded her fist on the chair arm, splashing brandy.

"Let me wipe that off before your wrist gets all sticky," Eva offered.

"Thank you." When the girl was finished, Mommy continued, "What I want . . . I want Miss Cleopatra

Jones's high-faluting ass back here in Los Angeles. Right now quick!"

Bruce rearranged his legs again. "Mother, you ought to know by this time that no one can force her to do anything."

"Ha!" Mommy bounced up and began pacing the study. She halted beneath a hanging mobile of Afrika Korps helmets. "Doesn't anybody ever think to dust this crap?"

"I'll do it right away, Mommy," said Eva.

Locking her hands behind her, flicking at her own backside with the swagger stick, Mommy paced. "Any of you ever hear of the B and S House?"

Baby Tony blinked, then cleared his throat. "I think maybe I did." He ran one pudgy ringed finger over the swastika pattern of his chair cushion.

"It's Cleopatra Jones's own private little Synanon," said Mommy, chuckling. "Her very own do-gooder home for wayward junkies." She paused in the middle of the rug, nodding. "Now, I just bet if anything were to happen to her pet charity, why, she'd be on the first plane back to L.A."

"I think she would," agreed Eva, reaching up to dust the mobile.

Mommy watched the girl's breasts jiggle for several seconds. Then she went to the phone, grabbed it up, and dialed a number.

Three

The police cars came hooting through the narrow streets of the black neighborhood, toplights spinning and winking red. A chubby black man coming out of a corner grocery with a six-pack of beer under his arm hopped back into the store again. Three lanky eleven-year-olds huddled together in front of a run-down brick building turned, in unison, to throw the cops the finger.

The cars closed in on an old wood-frame house in the middle of the next block, a well-kept place, freshly white-painted. Until now the night street had been relatively quiet. The police vehicles formed a zigzag pattern in the middle of the street; uniformed men began tumbling out of them and positioning themselves for the impending assault.

Lt. Tompkins slid out of his car. He stood watching the doorway of the neat white house, running his

tongue over his canine tooth. A hand-made sign over the door read B and S House. He turned to scan the men around him. "Everybody ready?"

"You bet your ass," said the eager, chunky cop next to him. He was Sgt. Purdy, thickset and just barely over the height limit. He was clutching a shotgun and chewing a large wad of pink gum.

A younger blond uniformed man came up to the pair. "I don't like this," he said to the lieutenant.

"So you don't like it. Noted."

"Why don't we wait for Crawford?" suggested blond Sgt. Kert.

Tomkins's tongue worked at his tooth for a few seconds. "You tried to get hold of him. He's not around."

"Okay, I know. But I still . . ."

"It would be a real help, Kert, if you let me run my own damn department," Lt. Tomkins told him. He gave the chunky Purdy a jab in the arm. "Okay, let's hit these bastards."

"Go get 'em!" Purdy ordered the others.

The cops began to fan out.

Three of them went galloping up the front steps to hit the wooden door full force. It went ripping off its hinges to fly into the dim hallway beyond.

Soon there were uniformed men all over the house. Glass began cracking and smashing; furniture bounced off walls; people shouted.

Lt. Tomkins nodded and went casually up into the house, his sharp-knuckled right hand hovering over his holster.

Chuckling, the chunky Sgt. Purdy followed in the lieutenant's wake, his shotgun held across his chest.

Sgt. Kert shook his head and tagged after them.

Tomkins, at the same leisurely pace, climbed up to the second floor of the B and S House. He halted in front of a pair of double doors. He gestured at the doors with his gun hand, tilting his head in the direction of two policemen who were waiting in the upper hallway.

They hurried forward and smashed the doors open.

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes and stepped across the threshold, avoiding the wood debris.

A half-dozen black people were in the room, four men and two girls. They watched Lt. Tomkins approach.

A young black man moved out from the rest to confront the cop. He was tall, broad shouldered and good looking in a slightly battered street fighter way. Taking off his dark glasses, he frowned.

Tomkins asked, "Would you be Reuben Masters?"

"I would," replied Reuben. "Who's asking?"

The lieutenant worked at his tooth with his tongue again. "I'm Lt. Tomkins," he said slowly. "I have a signed warrant to search this place."

"What about the doors?" asked Reuben, his face close to the lieutenant's. "You got yourself a signed warrant to kick them in?"

Making an angry noise, Purdy came into the room now. "I suppose you'd like us to stand around on the doorstep like a bunch of goddamn Boy Scouts," he said. "So you can blow our heads off."

Reuben moved around Tomkins and nearer the chunky sergeant. "You got something you want to complain to me about?"

Purdy made the angry noise again. He took a step back, then poked the barrels of the shotgun into the

black man's chest. "Don't you try to crowd me, boy."

Kert stepped into the room. "Jesus, Purdy!" he cautioned.

Reuben didn't touch the gun that was being shoved at him. He caught Purdy's eye and told him in an even voice, "Put that thing down, or I'll shove it up your ass."

Kert eased over, placed a hand on the shotgun, and lowered it. "Come on, Purdy, relax."

Purdy took several breaths in through his open mouth. To Tomkins he said, "We don't have to explain nothing to these people, Lieutenant. We don't have to listen to a lot of bullshit. We came here to search, so let's search."

Reuben laughed. "You want to start by searching me personal?" He started to say something to Sgt. Kert, but stopped, frowning at the doorway.

The scuffle he'd heard out there spilled into the big meeting room. A uniformed cop shoved a struggling young black through the doorway. He held the boy's arm twisted up behind his back with one hand. His other hand held a leather jacket.

"What is it?" asked Lt. Tomkins.

"Look what we found on this little son of a bitch." The cop gave the boy a shove that sent him slamming into the wall. The cop reached his now free hand into a pocket of the coat and drew out a glassine bag filled with a white substance. "Three guesses what this is."

The boy turned to Reuben. He shook his head violently from side to side, rubbing at his arm. "I swear, Reuben. I swear to God it ain't mine. You got to believe me. I never seen it before."

Reuben nodded. "I believe it, Jimmy."

"Take him down and book him," ordered Lt. Tomkins.

Jimmy suddenly kicked out at the coat-holding cop. The man yelled, falling off balance. Jimmy spun and made a dive toward the door.

"You little shit!" Sgt. Purdy swung the shotgun up, his finger tightening on a trigger.

Reuben was at his side. He gave the gun a violent shove upward as it went off.

The shot freckled the ceiling.

Reuben called out, "Jimmy, come on back."

"What the hell are you doing, boy?" shouted Purdy. "Interfering with an officer. . . ."

Jimmy hesitated at the threshold. He shrugged, spread out his hands, and turned to face Reuben. "Okay," he said. "But honest to God, Reuben, that stuff ain't mine."

"Listen, you. . . ." Purdy began, glaring at Reuben.

"Forget it, Purdy," said Kert. "You're lucky he. . . ."

Lt. Tomkins cut in. "We'll concentrate on booking our young friend for possession and resisting arrest. Mr. Masters we'll get to at a later date."

Purdy handed his weapon to the lieutenant. He fished a pair of handcuffs out and crossed to Jimmy. "Allow me," he said, grinning.

Jimmy held out his wrists.

The chunky sergeant suddenly swung out with his right fist. "You little shit." The blow dug into the boy's stomach.

Jimmy doubled, clutching at himself, gagging.

Reuben's nostrils flared, and he took a determined step toward the two of them. But there was a restraining hand on his arm.

It was Sgt. Kert. "Not now," he said.

Reuben got himself under control. He knew the sergeant was right. "Yeah," he said, "not now. But maybe later."

Four

Captain Lou Crawford of the Los Angeles Police Department rubbed slowly at a spot on his desk top with the stubby fingers of his right hand. He clenched the fingers into a fist and pounded on the spot. "You bunch of buffoons!" he said. He was a stocky man in his early forties, wearing a gray off-the-rack suit that was already crumpled this soon into the day. "You fugheaded nitwits."

Standing ringed around his office were Lt. Tomkins, Sgt. Purdy, Sgt. Kert, and two of the other cops who'd taken part in the raid on the B and S House last night.

"Hold it now, Lou," said the lean Tomkins. He worked his tongue over his front teeth.

The fist smacked the desk again, jiggling coffee out of the plaid mug. "Who the hell authorized that damn bust?" demanded Crawford.

"I told you, Lou," said Tomkins, shifting his position slightly. "The word came from downtown."

Crawford stood up, frowning at the lieutenant. Behind the circle of men the morning sky showed at the small windows, brown and hazy. "They got a great new invention now, Tomkins," he said. "It's called a telephone. Why the hell wasn't I notified?"

Lt. Tomkins nodded in the direction of young blond Sgt. Kert. "I notified him," he said.

"I tried to get through to you, Lou," said Kert. "But you weren't available—you were on a Code 5."

"You should have tried harder."

"Maybe so," admitted Kert. "Anyway, Lou, I did the next best thing."

"What was that?" asked Crawford with a growl.

"Well, I went along to keep things cool," answered the young sergeant. "Because I fig.—"

"You sure kept things cool." The stocky captain came out from behind his desk. "Front door ripped clean off the hinges, furniture smashed, fourteen goddamn windows broken." He strode down the line, scowling at them all. "Jesus H. Christ, it was only a little wooden house, not the Bismark!"

"Listen now, Captain," said Sgt. Purdy, scratching at his thick neck. "I don't see as how we deserve all this chewing out."

Crawford stopped dead in front of the chunky sergeant. "You don't, huh?"

"I mean, you got to remember we did find a bag of shit on that kid," said Purdy. "So what if we did shake up a few niggers? It's no big deal."

Crawford moved two steps closer to him. "One more asshole remark out of you, Purdy, and you'll be out on the street." He poked a stubby finger toward

the windows. "And you won't go out of here by way of the door."

Kert reached out a restraining hand, catching hold of the captain's arm. "Easy now, Lou."

Mommy chuckled, rubbed her chubby palms together, and winked up at Adolf Hitler. "There hasn't been a strategist like me since poor Erwin Rommel passed away."

The lovely blonde Eva was standing behind Mommy's ornately carved chair, working on her enormous neck and shoulders with a vibrator. "I can't give you the very best massage if you bounce, Mommy."

Bruce, in a knee-length scarlet robe, had wandered into the study of the Bel Air mansion. "She always bounces up and down when she's euphoric."

"Are you dripping on the rug?" his mother asked him.

"Why would I be dripping on the rug?"

"I thought you'd been swimming."

Bruce sighed down into a wicker chair and crossed his legs. "The pool water's still absolutely frosty this early," he said. "What's that you're clutching to your bosom, Mother?"

"A cablegram," said Mommy, rattling the sheet of buff-colored paper. "A cablegram which just arrived from my intelligence-gathering staff in Turkey."

"Staff?" Bruce recrossed his legs. "A couple of pimps in Tasket."

The enormous red-haired woman ignored him. "Eva, go tell Baby Tony and Zap I want to see them."

"Yes, right away, Mommy." The honey-blonde clicked off the mechanism attached to her hand and

moved gracefully, fragilely, out of the room.

Stroking his bare ankle, Bruce asked, "News about your nemesis?"

Mommy snorted and tossed the cablegram in his direction.

It fluttered across the sunlit room, landing in the upper reaches of a potted palm. Bruce retrieved it and read it aloud as he drifted back to his chair. " 'Dear Mother: To make a really delicious Astakos Vrastos, first plunge lobster tails into boiling. salted water. Cook eight minutes. Drain, cool and remove from shells, splitting tails lengthwise. Love, Spiro.' " He touched the paper to his pale chin. "I can see why you're excited, gourmet that you are."

"It's in code, ninny."

"Something scandalous about Cleopatra Jones?" asked her son, rather nastily.

"If you'd take more interest in things, Bruce, you could decode messages for yourself."

"Cryptography was never one of my good subjects. What's it say?"

"It says my plan worked perfectly," said the enormous woman, chuckling once more. "I knew that meddling shine couldn't keep herself away from Los Angeles if something happened to her precious B and S House."

"Coming home, is she?"

"This very day," said Mommy.

Bruce folded the cable into smaller and smaller squares. "You know, Mother, it occurs to me that Cleopatra Jones may be more trouble for you here in L.A. than she was way off in the Middle East."

"She's not going to live long enough to make any trouble for anyone," Mommy assured him.

Five

There was the 707 in the muddy afternoon sky. It came curving in, slowing, to land at Los Angeles Airport. The jet-liner glided low over the runway to set down with one short, barking screech from the wheels.

Inside the terminal Baby Tony was standing casually next to one of the up escalators. He'd discovered a tiny blister beneath one of the heavy rings on his right hand. He had the ring twisted up and was licking at the blister when Cleopatra Jones's flight was announced as arriving.

Baby Tony brushed carefully at his long dark hair and flapped his left arm several times as unobtrusively as possible. His shoulder holster always chafed him on muggy days like today.

He walked heavily across the terminal to get a better view of the disembarking passengers. Zap was hunched in front of a vending machine. "Get ready to

move downstairs," said Baby Tony in a low voice as he passed.

"I wish they weren't out of Milk Duds," said Zap.

"What?" Baby Tony stopped.

Zap inclined his tiny weathered head at the candy machine. "I got this thing rigged so it gives me all I want on the same dime, but they're out of Milk Duds, which is what I like best."

"Forget about that, get ready for my signal."

"I got a whole pocket full of Almond Joy, and I don't even much. . . ."

Baby Tony lumbered on.

The passengers were starting to come out of the plane. The first, a gray-haired lady in a print dress, rubbed at her eyes as she hit the brown afternoon.

Next came a string of businessmen, and then Cleopatra Jones was stepping off the jet. She was wearing a gold-colored pants suit, a lacy white blouse, and a floppy hat with a huge brim.

The man operating the baggage jitney almost ran into the gray-haired lady. He pulled his eyes off Cleo and drove on to collect the baggage.

Baby Tony turned, putting his little finger to his left eye.

Zap, unrolling a roll of Neccos, caught the signal. He passed it on to a third man, and then the two of them casually started for the down escalator.

The fat Baby Tony took one more look at the gold-clad figure of Cleo and then he, too, headed down for the baggage area.

Passengers were filling the room, watching the three revolving baggage carousels, waiting for their suitcases and valises to emerge from the large central chute.

Of the three men working for Mommy, only Zap

was looking in the direction of the slowly revolving luggage mechanisms. Lounging near the exit door, he was munching a Nestlé's Crunch bar with his right hand in the vicinity of the automatic stuck in his belt.

Baby Tony, his back to the carousels, was squinting at the entrance door. Stationed beside that door was the third man, a round-shouldered blond young man in out-of-town clothes. He was also waiting for Cleo to show.

More passengers came in to reclaim their luggage. There was no sign of Cleopatra Jones.

Turning toward Zap, Baby Tony gave him an inquisitive look.

The weatherbeaten little man flicked a Crunch crumb off his cheek, shrugging. Then suddenly his mouth opened to form an O. He began nodding furiously.

"Huh?" Baby Tony blinked.

From out of the baggage chute itself, in the wake of a Valpack and a duffelbag, Cleo came sliding straight for Baby Tony's fat back.

"You wouldn't be looking for me, would you?"

"How'd you . . . ?" The heavyset gunman jabbed a hand under his jacket.

Cleo landed, flat-footed and wide-legged, beside him. She swung out, gave him three quick chops to the neck.

The fat gunman made a woofing noise before dropping to his knees. His gun hand snapped out of his coat empty as he toppled over onto his face. His rings clattered on the flooring; his hair flapped once when he hit.

"You didn't even say, 'Welcome home,' " said Cleo.

The blond gunman had a Mauser in his hand now.

He was stalking toward the middle of the room, scattering frightened passengers. The gun went off.

Cleo had ducked, and the slug thunked into a handsome alligator suitcase that was coming out of the chute. Glass tinkled, and then pine-scented after-shave lotion began to spurt out of the entry hole.

"Arnold, isn't that your bag?" cried a plump woman.

Cleo came up with her .38 Police Special gripped in both hands. Swiftly and carefully, she aimed and fired. Fired once, twice, three times.

The blond gunman took one more step before the first one caught him in the chest. He gave a surprised yell, stumbling back as though he'd just walked into a wall no one else could see. The next two slugs hit him in the chest, too, turning the front of him a bright liquid red. His arms went straight out from his sides. He coughed, dropped his gun, and died somewhere between upright and the floor.

Cleo surveyed the room. Zap was long gone, and Baby Tony, swaying some, was pushing out the exit door. She put her .38 away.

"You shot . . . you shot. . . ." began the gray-haired woman in the print dress. "You killed that man in cold blood, and I was sitting right across from you on the plane."

Cleo walked around the woman toward the dead man. The passengers moved out of her way.

Three airport cops burst in through the exit door, guns drawn.

"There she is," the gray-haired woman pointed out. "She killed that man."

"We'll have to ask you to put your hands on top of your head and. . . ." the lead cop, a thirty-five-year-old man with a thick sandy mustache, began.

"This ain't no time for party games." Cleo thrust one slender hand into her blouse, in between her upthrust breasts.

"Don't try anything, Miss," warned the mustached cop, his face flushing a bit.

The lovely black girl's eyebrows rose, showing above the rims of her dark glasses. She produced a thin, flat wallet and flipped it open.

The airport policeman leaned in to study it. "That's the Presidential seal, isn't it?"

"That's right," Cleo replied.

"That's your photo, and it says you're a Special Agent." The cop moved his revolver back in the direction of his belt holster. "It doesn't quite say what you're a special agent in . . . FBI, CIA, or . . . ?"

"Part of being special is you don't have to explain," Cleo told him as she put the IDs back between her breasts. "Now how about we find out who this hood is?"

"Crime in the streets," clucked the gray-haired woman. "It's getting worse and worse."

Six

His wife reappeared just as the phone rang. Gary Mesmer was in their large avocado-colored kitchen searching the refrigerator for something he could turn into lunch. It was three in the afternoon.

"Hello?" Mesmer said into the avocado-green wall phone. He was a middle-sized man of thirty-two, dark and moderately overweight.

"Did I wake you up?" asked a throaty voice.

"It's three o'clock here in Santa Monica, Leo," said Mesmer. He noticed a piece of chalk on the floor, bent down, and caught it up. On the memo blackboard next to the phone he scribbled, "Where the shit have you been?"

His pretty, leggy blonde wife smiled as she placed a small paper bag on top of the avocado-colored table. She pointed at the bag, saying, "Piggly Wiggly 2001."

"I've got some horrible news for you," said the man on the phone.

"What this time, Leo?"

"Well," said Leo Doone, managing editor of *News Magazine,* "they're not happy about that story on the Hottokeeki Quints you filed from Nobeoka, Japan, last week."

Watching his willowy blonde wife, Mesmer said to his boss, "I thought it turned out pretty good. Local color, some touching stuff in the hospital there." He erased the question on the small blackboard and replaced it with a new one: "What the fug is Piggly Wiggly 2001?"

"It turns out," said his editor, "there were six of them."

"Six of what?"

"Those little Jap buggers. Six, not five. You didn't count right and so *News* is the only mag calling them quints."

"Hell, I'm supposed to be the West Coast man anyhow, Leo. You keep sending me off. . . ."

"A brand new supermarket over in the Valley," answered his wife, JoElla, as she began to unpack the grocery bag. "It's a prototype for all future supermarkets. Everything's automated. They even have a robot box-boy."

"I've talked them into giving you another chance," said Leo. "A nice fat local assignment for you, too. They wanted to send you to Eluru, India, for the film festival, but. . . ."

Mesmer scrawled a new question for his wife: "You had to go all the way to San Fernando to get six cans of tomato sauce?"

"It was the whole ambiance I wanted to check out." JoElla put the half-dozen cans into an avocado-colored cabinet.

"I convinced them you're at your peak with native American material," his editor was saying.

"So what's the assignment?"

"There was a shoot-out out your way a little while ago; Gary."

"Come on, Leo, I don't want to do another Mafia thing."

"This was at the airport, and it doesn't sound like the Mafia," his boss told him. "Anyway, that's not what *News* is interested in. We want you to do an in-depth profile of the gal who was in the middle of the gun battle. Her name is. . . ."

"Cleopatra Jones," supplied Mesmer.

"You've already heard about the alleged incident?"

"Nope, I only guessed that's who you were talking about." Mesmer doodled on his chin with the chalk, thinking. "Yeah, she'd make a great feature, splash her big on the cover. She's very statuesque and. . . ."

"I hear she's got big knockers."

"That, too," agreed Mesmer. "The only thing is . . . she's almost impossible to interview. Sort of the Garbo of the crime-fighting world."

"You better get her to talk to you," suggested his editor. "You know how mags are folding here in Manhattan, Gary. I've got ten guys a day in asking for your job, including a couple Pulitzer Prize winners."

"What do they know about fancy writing?" On the blackboard he wrote: "And where the Christ were you last night?"

His willowy wife was leaning with her narrow

buttocks against the back of an avocado-colored chair. "At the Primal Scene. I left you a note."

"You can take a lot of time on this one, Gary. We want you to really dig—find out all about Cleopatra Jones, who she is and what she represents. Then give us one of your thought-provoking highly polished profiles."

On the board Mesmer wrote: "What's the deadline?"

"Ask *him,*" said his wife.

"Oops." He erased the query and asked his editor, "When do you want the thing?"

"I won't need the final draft for at least nine days."

"Wonderful," said Mesmer. "I can go back to my old practice of writing only one perfect sentence a day."

"Okay, get going on the Cleopatra Jones piece. Call me as you progress," said his editor. "Oh, but no more collect calls. The budget guys are starting to bitch. How's JoElla?"

On the board Mesmer put: "How are you?"

"Fine," replied the blonde.

"She's fine," Mesmer said into the phone and hung up.

The very old man was sitting at the edge of the vast swimming pool and watching a sooty seagull walking along the tiles. The old man's name was Evo "Charlie the Piano Tuner" Zanzara and he was ninety-seven years old. He had only one arm and was wearing a pair of yellow swim trunks with black seahorses on them. "Read that last part again," he requested in his dry old voice.

Standing to his left, in a conservative three-piece suit, was a bulky young man. He was holding a large-size magazine at arm's length. " 'Long eschewing the narcotics traffic for the more sedate pursuits of loan-sharking, gambling, and prostitution,' " he read, " 'the lords of the underworld are now casting a speculative gaze in the direction of the junk trade once again. Thus from coast to coast, from the scummy pile of misery which is Harlem to the sun-bleached pile of hopeless-ness that is Watts, the Mafia is starting to muscle back into dope.' "

Zanzara's wrinkled old head bobbed. "Why do you hold that thing out like that?"

"The type's too big."

"How come *News* is using too-big type all of a sudden?"

"This is the large-print edition for people with vision problems. One of your granddaughters gave you a subscription for Christmas."

"A sweet girl," sighed the old man. He placed his single hand over his sunken stomach. "A nice maga-zine. You can learn a lot from a nice magazine like that. Like for instance, I didn't know we were sup-posed to be back in the drug business."

"So it says here."

The old man nodded. "We better look in to it," he said. "Go in and ask the computer for all it's got on narcotics in the L.A. area. Profits, distribution, who's who. I want to study."

"Computer's on the bum today," said the bulky young man.

"So get somebody to fix it."

"Vito's fooling with it now."

"Vito? All he knows is hot cars," said Zanzara grumpily. "Here, help me up. I'll take a look."

The bulky young man got out of his chair and back into the mansion which the profits of activities other than the drug trade had bought for him.

Seven

Cleo gave her flat bare stomach one final rub with the yellow terry towel. Flipping it into the open wicker hamper, she said, "In for two."

Leaving the big white and gold bathroom, still naked, she strode long-legged into the living room of her apartment. Pale Oriental rugs dotted the glistening hardwood floors, like giant lily pads on a forest pool.

The long black girl lowered herself into a Herman Miller chair and picked up her white telephone from where it rested between Steuben glass owls on the marble-topped coffee table. To her right were full-length windows, masked now by closed jalousies. Behind her rose a wide floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcase.

With one slender finger she punched out a number.

After a moment Sgt. Kert's youthful voice said, "Yeah?"

"This is Cleopatra Jones," she announced. "I want to—"

"Hello, Cleo. We knew you were back," said Kert. "Hey, listen, I'm really sorry about the B and S House. There was nothing we. . . ."

"I want to talk to Crawford," cut in Cleo. She was sitting with her bare knees tight together, leaning forward.

"Sure, Cleo. Hold on."

Crawford's voice always took on a metallic touch on the telephone. "Hi, Cleo," he said. "Welcome back home."

"Don't give me that welcome jive," she said into the phone. "I want to know what's going on, Lou. Your boys about bulldozed the B and S House, the way I hear it. I thought I had a friend down there."

"You do, Cleo," Crawford assure her. "I don't know what the hell happened. The whole thing was planned to take place when I couldn't be reached."

Running her hand angrily along her bare thigh, Cleo asked, "Who ordered the bust?"

"I don't have any answers yet," answered the police captain. "All I know for sure is it came from very high up."

"That figures." The corkscrewing cord of the receiver went snaking across her left breast, catching on the nipple. "Let loose!"

"What?"

"Talking to the phone, that's all." She snapped the white cord away. "You sure you're not shucking me about this raid, Lou?"

"You know me better than that, Cleo."

"I guess I do."

"I heard about the rumpus at the airport. You're all right, aren't you?"

"Physically I'm okay," she replied.

"Physically you're terrific," said Crawford, chuckling.

"Ummm," said Cleo.

Crawford cleared his throat. Over the phone it sounded like somebody's faulty muffler. "We got a positive make on the dead man, possibles on the two goons who got away. The guy you took care of is Alexander 'Sandy' Bascom, originally of Des Moines, Iowa. He's been picked up for assault and battery, two counts of extortion, assault with a deadly weapon, armed robbery, attempted rape. . . ."

"Nobody's perfect," said Cleo, laconically.

"We should have more on the airport. . . ."

"Forget about the airport shit, Lou," Cleo told him. "We've got other things to talk about."

"Okay, shoot."

"Not on the phone, baby," she said. "Can you be at Art's place in an hour?"

"I'll make a point of it," promised Captain Crawford. "And, Cleo, if I'd known about it, they wouldn't have gone near that house."

After a few seconds she said, "Okay," and hung up.

Mommy's enormous left hand tightened. "You incompetent schmuck!" she said to Baby Tony. Her hand clutched ever tighter at his fat throat. "Do you think General Siegmund List, the brilliant Nazi tactician, had to put up with bunglers?"

"Ow, ow," complained Baby Tony, his back against the dark wood paneling. "One little mistake doesn't. . . ."

She slapped him again. "I tell you where to get her," she said. "I tell you how to get her," Mommy gave him another powerful smack across the mouth. "And still you blow it. You let that bitch come strutting out of the airport with not one scratch on her."

"Jesus," said Baby Tony mournfully. "How did I know she'd come out of the damn baggage chute?"

"How did you know she wouldn't?" Mommy used her fist this time.

"For heaven's sake, Mother." Bruce got a good grip on her broad shoulders and yanked her away. "That's enough discipline for one afternoon."

"Ung," groaned Baby Tony while he slid slowly down the smooth wall to land, bouncing, on the rug.

Mommy gave her son the evil eye, breaking free of his grasp. "I'll tell you all something," she shouted. "Especially you I'll tell something." She jabbed a huge finger in the direction of the weathered little Zap.

He was standing cautiously behind a leather chair, nervously eating at a Peter Paul Mound. "I'm all ears," he said.

"I'm tired," Mommy announced in a bellow, "I'm tired of being a pussycat." She tromped across to another wall and yanked down a huge wall map. "From now on, nobody's going to get any more sweetness and light from me. From now on, it's blitzkrieg!"

The beautiful blonde Eva, dressed now in a short skirt and candy-stripe blouse, moved quietly to Mommy's side to hand her a wooden schoolroom pointer. "Use this, Mommy."

"Thank you, dear." A smile briefly touched Mommy's face, then faded. She whacked at the street map of the Los Angeles area with the pointer.

"Easy, Mother," cautioned Bruce. "Every time you

get emphatic we have to go out and buy a new map."

She ignored him and whacked the map again. "The revenues from the Ninth District are embarrassing. Do you know why?"

"Well, it could be. . . ." began Zap.

"Shut up. I'll tell you why," said Mommy. "Because there is no discipline in the Ninth." She slapped the pointer against her leg like a swagger stick. "And do you know why there is no discipline? Because there is no fear."

"Oof umph," said Baby Tony. He was on his feet now, clutching the edge of a carved bookcase.

"Doodlebug hasn't turned over one nickel in a week," Mommy continued. "Why, you ask? Because Doodlebug doesn't fear us. We've got mealy-mouthed do-gooders on the streets. We've got that bitch Cleopatra poking her nose into my business. And do you know why?"

"Umf," said Baby Tony.

"I'll tell you why," roared Mommy. "Because nobody fears us!" She galloped to Baby Tony and commenced whapping him on the head with the pointer. "Well, the honeymoon is over, believe you, me."

"Mother, for heaven's sake." Bruce trotted over to pull her away again.

Eight

The hamburger stand was small and narrow, consisting of a five-stool counter and three green booths. Lettered on the window in purple and yellow graffiti-style lettering were the words Art's Hamburger Bistro. It was across the street from Police headquarters. Art himself, a large black man of forty, was behind the counter when Capt. Crawford and Sgt. Kert came in.

"Oh, hey, Captain," said Art, "I want to show you something."

The stocky captain eased around the only other customer, a chubby cab driver hanging over a stool. "You're planning another comeback?"

Art grinned. "No, I'm in the middle of a comeback already." From under the counter he produced a showcard.

The window poster was printed in glowing green

and orange. It announced: Art Cadillac & His Blues Blasters Now Appearing! There was a photo of Art, ten years younger, wearing a fur-trimed lamé suit and electric guitar.

Crawford shielded his eyes, backing from the bright poster. "Are you and the group playing again?"

Art took an admiring look at the showcard before slipping it away. "Only had a hundred of these printed up. No use being too optimistic."

"Where you been playing?" asked Crawford. "What joints?"

"Oh, I don't play clubs no more," said Art. "See, times are changed, Captain. Now I'm what you call a folk artist. See, they also got this thing they call nostalgia. Between that and being a folk artist now, we been getting about two or three gigs a month."

"Where?"

"Last week we played the Blessed Mother of Jesus Junior Convent up in Oxnard," replied Art. "And a week before that, the San Fernando Junior Teachers College."

Crawford said, "Schools?"

"Right," said Art. "For white kids. See, down here among brothers I'm maybe washed up. But to white kids I'm a folk artist. Last month at the convent they had Howdy Doody."

"Another folk artist," said Kert.

"These kids really dig my show," continued Art. "I always like to open with "I'm Sharp When I Hit the Coast," wearing my gold suit. I used to do the opener in the leopard-skin dinner jacket, but it's a little tight across . . . hey, Cleo!"

Cleo, wearing a maroon turtleneck, double-knit hip-

huggers, and a wine-colored turban, came striding into the bistro. "How's it going, Art?"

The fat cabbie dropped the jelly doughnut he'd just taken out of the pedestal-dish on the counter. His tiny blue eyes followed the girl.

The long black Cleo walked over to a booth.

Crawford, with Kert in tow, joined her. "Well, hello, Cleo," he said.

"Hello, Lou," she said. "Hello, Kert." She dropped down onto the green booth bench.

Crawford and his sergeant sat opposite. "Recognize this guy?" The captain fished a photo out of the breast pocket of his wrinkled suit.

The girl glanced down at the picture he dropped on her side of the table. "Yeah, that's one of the other cats at the airport. The one I cold-cocked. He got away." She tapped the picture with slender fingers. "Who is he?"

"They call him Baby Tony," answered Crawford. "We'll take care of him."

"Like you took care of the B and S House?"

"Jesus, Cleo, even Eichmann got a trial," complained the stocky captain. "I told you how it was."

She started to say something, then stopped as Art appeared balancing three cups of coffee.

"On the house," he announced. "To celebrate the double comeback, me and Cleo."

When he was gone, Cleo said, frowning at the young blond Kert, "I hear you were right there on the spot, Kert—in on all the fun and games."

"Well, I. . . ."

"Damn good thing he was," cut in Crawford. "He saved Jimmy Beekers's life."

Cleo shrugged. Her voice got lower and meaner. "And who's this guy Purdy?"

"New man in the division. You haven't met him yet."

"I got a feeling I'm going to," said Cleo. "Right soon."

Crawford tried his coffee. "Now, Cleo, don't make things any worse," he told her. "This ain't exactly your jurisdiction, you know."

"My jurisdiction stretches from Turkey to the Watts Tower, baby."

Crawford took another sip of coffee, not saying anything.

"What's going to happen to the B and S House?" asked Cleo.

Setting the cup down, leaning back, he answered, "The D.A.'s going to padlock the whole works. The house, the grocery store, and their other small businesses." He paused, then went on. "He's giving them seventy-two hours to close everything up."

"What's Reuben say about that?"

Crawford said, "Reuben says they'll need tanks and infantry and a couple units of the National Guard to shut that place down on him."

Cleo knuckled her chin thoughtfully before saying, "Tell the D.A. to back off."

"They did find that stuff on the Beekers kid," reminded the captain.

"The odds are pretty good that shit was planted," said Cleo. "Damn, Lou, if they close up the B and S . . . it's going to hurt a lot of kids who got no place else to go."

Crawford was thoughtful for a few seconds. "Okay,

I'll do what I can for the house, Cleo," he said. "But you talk to Reuben, tell him to go easy. I don't want this town to blow up."

"I'll be in touch," said Cleo. She was up and away.

Cleo's pale green Porsche Targa convertible was cruising along the late afternoon freeway. She stretched out one slender hand and inserted a new tape cassette into the player. B.B. King began singing the blues.

From out of the glove compartment she took a pair of dark glasses. Strapped beneath the compartment, hidden from outside view, was a sawed-off carbine rifle.

"That's an awful lot of car," said a young nasal voice to her left.

Through her dark glasses Cleo scanned the glistening red-and-silver hot-rod growling beside her.

Two shaggy but upper-class boys were in the chopped and channeled car.

"Especially for a lady," said the other boy.

"It can't be her car," said the one at the wheel.

"Maybe it's the maid's day off," said the other, "and her boss lady let her borrow it."

"That must be it," said the driver. He gunned the hot-rod and it roared ahead.

Cleo did nothing to acknowledge them.

In a moment the red-and-silver car dropped back beside her. "Want to prove you can handle that thing, baby?" called the shaggy boy at the wheel.

"Want to dice?" suggested the other.

The rod zoomed away again, then slowed and waited until Cleo was beside them again.

"Come on, we won't tell your boss."

Suddenly Cleo downshifted the powerful custom car.

She rocketed away from the stodgy hot-rod.

Neither of the boys spoke until the Porsche was a green spec on the horizon. "How about that!" said the awed boy at the wheel.

Nine

Cleo's Porsche glided up to the curb. The tall black girl hopped out and stood on the rutted sidewalk for a moment with hands on hips. "Yeah, that was some party the cops threw," she murmured.

The broken front windows of the B and S House were boarded up. Two young blacks were in the process of installing new front doors.

One of them, a plump boy with freckles and reddish hair, noticed her approaching. He grinned and said, "How you doing, Cleo?"

Her booted foot hit the first step. "Carrying on, Reds. How are things round here?"

"Not bad right now," said Reds. "We're starting to put the pieces together, you understand. And, hey, Cleopatra, this is Mark." He indicated his lanky partner, gesturing with a screwdriver.

"Nice looking at you," said Mark, grinning, too.

"Thank you kindly," replied Cleo without really

grinning back. She frowned at the damaged exterior of the house before asking, "Where's Reuben?"

"Inside," answered Reds. "In the infirmary, you understand."

She nodded and moved between the two boys and into the hallway. In the first doorway on her right a young girl stood watching her, a pretty lanky girl with a formidable afro and a mean look. Cleo gave her a nod.

"You must be Cleopatra Jones." The girl looked over Cleo and her clothes.

Cleo stopped. "That's right, I am."

"Somebody told me you used to live right around the corner."

"That's right, too."

The girl took a step into the hall. "You're a little late for the fun, aren't you, girl? How come you ain't down here with the rest of us?"

Cleo did not reply.

The girl continued, her voice shriller. "Don't you know what's going on out here in the streets? Don't you know what they're trying to do to us?"

A door farther down the corridor opened. Reuben Masters stepped out. To the girl he said, "You better learn to tell your friends from your enemies, Annie."

Annie said, "Shee-it." She shrugged her narrow shoulders, then retreated back out of the hall.

Cleo was watching the big man. "Hello, Reuben."

He smiled, walking toward her. Gently he took one of her hands. "Cleo," he said. "Happy to. . . ."

"Reuben!" called a girl's voice from the room he'd just left.

He turned, returning, fast, to the infirmary. "Be right there."

Cleo followed.

In the clean white room a Negro boy of thirteen lay on a bed. He thrashed, groaned. His face was gray, speckled with perspiration.

At the side of the bed a girl in a fresh white smock was sitting. She held a cold compress to the moaning boy's head.

Reuben knelt next to the bed and and took hold of the boy's hand. "Things getting rough, Enery?"

"Oh, man," muttered the boy, rocking from side to side. "Reuben!"

"I'm right here, buddy."

"I ain't," said Enery, "I ain't . . . going to make it." Pain twisted his young face. "Oh, shit, Reuben."

"Easy, easy," Reuben told him. "You going to make it."

"I don't know, I don't know."

"Well, I know." Reuben rose and nodded at the girl. "Stay with him, Terry."

As Reuben moved toward the threshold, Cleo took hold of his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder.

He patted one of her hands. Out in the corridor he said, "No matter how many times you've seen a kid in withdrawal, it's always heavy." He slapped his fist into his palm. "Damn it, Cleo, you and me started this place together. You *know* we're clean." He nodded back at the infirmary, where Enery was still moaning and crying out. "If they shut us down, who's going to be around to help kids like him?"

Cleo started to say something, then stopped. "What's all that crap?" she asked. She could see into a room with a partially open door. The room was full of guns, hand weapons, rifles, shotguns. At a card table Annie and a young man were dismantling and cleaning an M-16 rifle.

"Just what it looks like," answered Reuben. "We got ourselves what you call an arsenal."

"Guns ain't going to help nothing." Cleo lifted her dark glasses, staring directly up into his eyes. "They're sure not going to help little Enery back there."

A grimness had come to Reuben's face. "If they want this house," he said to her, "they're going to have to scratch for it."

"That's right," said Alice, coming defiantly to the doorway of the gun room. "This is one chick who ain't going to move one damn inch."

Cleo resumed walking toward the front door. "Reuben," she said finally, "give me seventy-two hours."

"Cleo, I don't. . . ."

"Just seventy-two hours, Reuben. Promise me, no fireworks for that long."

"What about *them?*"

"I'll see nobody comes near here," she said. "How about it . . . let me have just seventy-two hours?" She didn't plead, she asked.

Reuben said, "Okay, you got it."

Reds stepped aside so Cleo and Reuben could walk out onto the porch. "Good to have you back, Cleo, you understand," he said.

The long tall girl smiled at him.

When they were beside Cleo's Porsche, Reuben said, "I'm glad to have you back, too."

She put one hand flat against his chest. "You take care of yourself, you hear?"

"Don't worry." He placed his powerful fingers, gently, against her cheek and traced the bone. "See you soon."

Cleo stroked his palm with her cheek, smiling. "Soon."

The first rifle bullet that came singing across the street took Reuben in the arm. He cried out, then slumped back away from her.

She pulled him down beside her on the sidewalk.

A second shot thummed into the far side of her car, which was shielding them.

Back in the B and S doorway Reds shouted, "What the shit?" as he and Mark ducked inside.

"You okay?" the girl asked Reuben.

"Yeah, damn it, I'm okay." He had a handkerchief out and was pressing it to his arm. Blood showed between his pressing fingers.

Jerking open the door of her Porsche, Cleo stretched herself in and rapidly unhooked the sawed-off carbine that had been resting under the glove compartment.

Another shot came whizzing down through the late afternoon to slam into the hood of the car.

Cleo threw herself out of the car, clutching the carbine to her. "Up on the roof," she said to the wounded Reuben. "The pink building across the street."

"We can make it back inside," he said.

Cleo shook her head negatively. Then suddenly she was moving, zigzagging across the street. She dived into the entry of the three-story pink apartment building. There had been no more shots. Pausing to load the carbine, Cleo pushed on inside.

She was sprinting across the black-and-white foyer toward the stairway when she noticed the elevator indicator. The arrow was swinging down toward 1. Cleo planted herself a few feet alongside the metal doors, the butt of the carbine resting against her hip.

The elevator wheezed to a landing and bounced to a stop. The doors rattled open. A white cane was thrust out and began tapping on the tiles.

The gray-haired woman holding the cane wore dark glasses. "Is this my floor?" she asked.

"It surely is, ma'am," said the white-haired black man next to her. "I'll be more than happy to help you to the street."

"Thank you so much."

The black man's mouth fell halfway open when he noticed Cleo's gun.

She nodded at him and stepped politely out of the way. She turned on one heel and started again for the stairs.

The old couple shuffled in the direction of the door to the street. After six steps the black man let go of the woman's arm. He tugged a revolver from under his coat.

The woman produced a .45 automatic from her handbag.

They both turned to fire at Cleo's back.

But Cleo was facing them, midway up the staircase. She fired the carbine twice.

The black man began moving back against his will. The revolver dropped from his hand.

The gray-haired woman was pushed back as though by a fierce wind. Her white cane went spinning away like a lost baton and the gray wig flew from her head.

The two of them fell at the same time, against each other, tangling as they fell. Slamming down against the tiny squares of black and white. Landing dead.

Still on the stairs, Cleo said, "Too bad, folks. You just blew your Social Security."

Ten

Three very small black girls were playing hopscotch on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Johnson's Old-Fashioned Down Home Restaurant. They all paused, including the one who'd just hopped from square 2 to square 3, to watch Cleo come striding up.

Twilight was filling the street, and as Cleo reached for the door of the restaurant, a wrinkled black arm appeared in the front window to turn on the small electric sign.

"Mrs. Johnson," said Cleo, smiling at the wiry old woman who was backing out of the window.

Mrs. Johnson was small and thin, wearing a house dress with a home-made apron over it. "Cleopatra, honey," she exclaimed when she recognized her. "You through traipsing around the world?" She took hold of the tall girl and hugged her.

"Well, I thought I'd traipse on my own turf for a while." She returned the hug.

Mrs. Johnson shook her head appreciatively, surveying Cleo. "Those certainly are *bad* boots, honey," she remarked as she moved toward one of the room's eight small tables.

"Play your cards right," said Cleo, "I'll get you a pair."

"And have all the young studs come tom-catting around again?" She sat in a straight-backed chair. "No, I passed through that stage long time ago. Sit yourself down, child, we got a little time to talk before the evening rush starts up."

Taking a chair next to the old woman, Cleo asked, "What have you heard about the raid on the B and S House?"

"I figured that was what brought you back," said Mrs. Johnson. "That and Reuben Masters." She nodded her head toward the kitchen. "Can I fetch you something? The ribs I cooked up special this morning?"

"No, thanks."

"Lots of young folks turning away from down-home cooking," said the old woman. "Going in for things like sukiyaki and. . . ."

"About the B and S House?"

"All I know, child," said Mrs. Johnson, "is there was some bad goings-on there. And Jimmy Beekers got himself arrested."

Cleo leaned toward her. "What do you hear about that? Do they say whether Jimmy is guilty?"

"They don't say." She shook her head and slapped her palms on her knees. "But you know he used to run with some pretty fast company."

"You think Doodlebug is tied into this?"

"Well," said the old woman, "I don't know for sure. But that is his territory, ain't it?"

"So Doodlebug's got his own territory now, huh?"

"Oh yeah, he's really getting himself up in the world." A frown added wrinkles to her forehead. "If you're fixing to mess with him, you be careful, hear? He's been doing some really mean things since he took to wearing them silk ties."

Cleo sat back, smiling. "Mrs. Johnson," she said, "I think I'm going to need your boys."

"My babies?"

The two huge black men snarled at each other. Then one of them, the larger, made a flat-fingered jab at the other's stomach.

The second man caught the extended arm, levered his opponent up into the air, and sent him sailing several feet.

"Bravo," said Cleo, walking out onto the practice mats of the small gym.

Matthew Johnson, the one who'd flown through the air, rose up laughing. "Long time since we've seen you, Cleo." He adjusted his karate robe, then gave her a hugging embrace that lifted her off the ground.

When Matthew set her down, Melvin, the other Johnson boy, picked her up. "We heard you was back in town."

"Where was you, anyhow?" asked Matthew.

Cleo caught her breath, then answered, "I been moving around."

"So we hear," said Melvin. "You back for good?"

"For a while," the long black girl replied. "Right now I need your help again."

"Okay," said Matthew. "Tell us when and where."

"Not to mention who," added Melvin.

Cleo asked, "Ever hear of a cop named Purdy?"

"Not me, Cleo," said Matthew, glancing at his bulky brother.

"Me neither. Who is he?"

"He works out of Lou Crawford's division," answered Cleo. "Find out all you can about him, and stay in touch with your mama. I'll get back to you in a couple hours."

"All right," Matthew assured her. "It's done."

She smiled at each of them, turned, and walked away across the gym floor.

Melvin watched Cleo's retreating buttocks sway gently. "God bless you for the wonderful work you're doing," he said.

Cleo was back on the freeway for five minutes before she became absolutely sure a black sedan was trailing her.

Eleven

The elevator said, "Good morning, welcome to *News Magazine*'s West Coast offices."

"It's afternoon," said Mesmer, as he stepped inside. "Late afternoon."

"Good morning, welcome to *News Magazine*'s West Coast offices," repeated the transcribed voice out of the ceiling speaker. "Floor, please."

"Twelve," said Mesmer.

The elevator played a waltz medley as they rose upward.

Mesmer found three fat folders on his gray metal desk and Miss Evans standing beside it. "All this background on Cleopatra Jones?"

The thin, prim-looking secretary answered, "Yes, and I've got some new stuff that's just been coming in on the teletype." She waved some yellow sheets at him.

Mesmer stood at the window of his sometime office and looked out at Sunset Boulevard far below. Dozens

of bright sports cars were hurrying by down there. "What's she been doing since she got back to L.A.?"

"Killing people," said Miss Evans, "mostly."

"The guy at the airport." Mesmer sat on the edge of his desk. "I know about him."

"Oh, there've been *two* more since then," she said calmly. "That came in only moments ago."

Mesmer took the teletype sheets and read them. "Maybe she's trying for a record," he quipped, sarcastially. "Did you get in touch with her?"

"No, but I left a message with her answering service."

The desk phone rang and Mesmer caught it up. "Yeah?"

"I'm leaving you a dinner in the oven," said his wife. "It's a casserole, and all you. . . ."

"Where are you going?"

JoElla said, "The Nut Hatch."

"I thought you went to one of those group therapy bars last night."

"This isn't like The Primal Scene. This is a new peanut butter restaurant."

"Beg pardon?"

"You know, that's all they serve. Different kinds of peanut butter sandwiches," explained JoElla. "Peanut butter and marmalade on Russian rye, peanut butter and grape jelly on gluten loaf, pea—"

"Who you going with?"

"Susan. You know how fond she is of peanut butter, and since you're working on your profile. . . ."

"Okay, I'll see you late tonight."

"Probably," said JoElla and hung up.

Mesmer held the receiver in his hand for a full minute before setting it down. "What about Washing-

ton?" he asked Miss Evans. "Anything on exactly who Cleo Jones works for?"

"Well, I got a lead on a former CIA agent who might be able to tell us something."

"Did you get to him?"

"He went to prison last week for wiretapping the Democratic Party headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware."

"Keep trying on that angle." He pressed his palms on the folders. "Where does she hang around at when she's in town? Maybe I can catch her there."

"Three places seem to have a priority," replied the secretary. "A rehabilitation center for drug-users called the B and S House, a soul food joint called Mrs. Johnson's, and a hamburger stand right across from the police headquarters down there."

Mesmer copied the addresses off the sheet she held out to him. "There goes my low-carbohydrate diet," he said.

The bulky young man fluttered his hand in the air. "She's sort of . . . you know."

Ancient Evo "Charlie the Piano Tuner" Zanzara watched the hand drawing vague pictures in the air. He was sunk down in a brown leather chair in the library of his Beverly Hills mansion. "Two million dollars I've poured into that computer, and all it can tell me about this Mommy broad is that. . . ." He gave a feeble imitation of the young man's gestures.

"Well, the computer . . . you know, computers don't like to talk dirty." In his other hand the bulky young man held some computer printout. "It doesn't have anything to do with the narcotics take."

"You mean she's kind of funny?"

The young man fluttered his hand again. "That's *it*, Mr. Zanzara. She's sort of . . . you know."

"What's this world coming to?" sighed the old man. "But didn't I hear she's been married and got a boy?"

The hand fluttered again. "He's sort of . . . you know, too."

"Ah," said old Zanzara. "Like father, like son. Okay, read me those profit figures. Grosses first, then the net take."

The bulky young man obliged.

When he finished, Zanzara smiled a wrinkled old smile. "That sounds pretty good," he said. "Even taking into consideration the current inflationary spiral."

"You figure we ought to move in?"

"Put a couple boys to watching this Mommy," said Zanzara. "Find out a little more about the mechanics of her whole operation."

Across the room a computer had been built into one wall. The huge mechanism made a low raspberry sound now.

"What's it want?" asked the old man.

"Something more to tell us, I think." The bulky young man trotted over to catch the latest printout.

"More numbers?"

"No, it's just a couple of sentences," replied the young man. "It says, 'Business prognosis highly negative if one Cleopatra Jones involved. Advise avoid entanglement with.' "

"What does that mean?"

"I think it means we shouldn't mess around with this Cleopatra Jones."

"Who the hell is she?"

"I don't know."

"Find out," ordered Zanzara.

Twelve

Both the men in the black sedan had knocked-about faces. They were in their middle thirties, both wearing dark windbreakers and slacks. The man at the wheel was named Leroy. The man beside him was called Sonny, and he had a submachine gun in his lap.

"She's got a nice ass on her," said Sonny.

"Uh," said Leroy. He was hunched over the steering wheel, his eyes on Cleo's pale green Porsche up ahead.

"Nice tits, too, from the quick look I got," continued Sonny reasonably. "I always take a nice ass over nice tits, though. That's the way I am."

"Think about the job Mommy's hired us for," suggested Leroy, equally reasonable.

"Don't worry about me," said Sonny. "When you make your move I'll be ready." He slapped a chunky hand against the machine-gun stock.

Up ahead Cleo began to speed up, stretching the distance between them.

"Looks like she's spotted us," said Leroy.

"So let's get her."

The black sedan surged forward on the twilight freeway. They cut down the distance between them again.

"Ever make it with a spade chick?" asked Sonny.

Leroy grunted. "Shut up and concentrate on knocking off this Jones broad."

"I had this black bimbo once in San Pedro," continued Sonny. "She was small, you know, only about. . . ."

Cleo's Porsche shot away from them, zigzagging around other cars.

Leroy's foot tromped harder on the gas. The sedan roared nearer and nearer to the pale green Porsche.

"This chick in San Pedro wasn't actually a midget," said Sonny. "But not all that tall, either."

Cleo was driving parallel to a large flatbed truck in the lane to her right. Sitting, unanchored, on the truck were three portable outdoor toilets. Stenciled on the side of each white metal structure were the words: Abel Portajon-The Best Sight at Your Construction Site!

"She had exceptionally large knockers for so small a girl," recalled Sonny. He reached over, rolled down his window, and got his submachine gun ready to use.

Suddenly Cleo swerved her Porsche toward the side of the truck.

Leroy caught a glimpse of the driver's startled face in the side mirror of the truck.

The truck made a screeching sway to the right.

At the same moment Cleo sped forward.

The portable toilet nearest the edge of the truck teetered an instant before falling over onto the road. It slammed down, with a grating clang, on the freeway directly in the path of the black sedan.

"Holy Christ!" exclaimed Leroy as they hit the thing.

The huge living room was predominantly purple. There was a thick purple rug on the floor and rich purple drapes covered the large windows.

Standing in front of a gilt-framed mirror and teasing his impressive Afro stood Doodlebug. He was a lean man in his early thirties, wearing a white satin smoking robe, red slippers, and matching foulard scarf. "Shit," he said.

Sitting on a white-and-gold sofa chair was Pickle, a husky, close-cropped man. "Your hair looks just fine, Doodlebug."

Fireplug, a squat heavyset lump of a man, was leaning against the mirror-faced bar in the corner of the room. "That's right," he said. "That's right."

"My hair don't look *good,*" corrected Doodlebug, "it looks magnificent." He gave it a final tease before setting the comb aside. "That's not what's eating on me. It's that goddamn Mommy. What the hell did she want to bring Cleopatra Jones back to town for? That chick is ten miles of bad road."

"That's right,' 'agreed Fireplug. "That's right."

Doodlebug moved to a purple-and-gold loveseat and sat. "Mommy ups and gets the B and S House busted," he said. "Then she causes all that mess at the airport. What's that do but make the cops nervous, and me nervous? This whole mothering town's going to get hotter than a firecracker." He shook a mani-

cured fist at his two minions. "Well, if Mommy can't run things no better than that . . . well, I'm going to start running my own business."

Pickle swallowed. "You ain't fixing to quit Mommy?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with your ears," Doodlebug told him. "You heard correct."

"She ain't going to like that." Pickle shook his head. "She ain't going to like that at all."

"That's right," observed Fireplug. "That's right."

"And when Mommy don't like something," reminded Pickle, shifting in his white-and-gold chair, "she's bad trouble."

"That's right," said Fireplug. "That's right—"

"Shut up, Fireplug. You going to *'that's-right'* me into an early grave." He rose off the loveseat. "Anyhow, if Mommy's looking for trouble, I ain't exactly Little Bo Peep." He frowned in the direction of one of the ornate gold-and-purple doors. "I need a drink. Arthur, come in here a moment."

The door opened, and a lean blond man in his early fifties entered. He was dressed in a conservative chauffeur's uniform. "You called, sir?"

Doodlebug grinned at his two associates. "Yes, Arthur. Please fix me a drink, my usual."

"Very good, sir," replied Arthur. "Allow me to get some fresh ice." He left the room.

Doodlebug nodded happily. "Now that's what I call—"

The doorbell buzzed.

"I'll get it, boss." Fireplug moved to another of the room's purple-and-gold doors.

A moment later Cleo was standing in the hall, tote bag slung over one shoulder, hands on hips.

"Well, if it ain't Miss Cleopatra Jones herself." Doodlebug sank back down onto the loveseat. "Check her out, Plug."

Fireplug reached out his hefty palms to frisk the girl.

Cleo caught one of his arms, twisted it, spun him around, and pushed him away with a boot against his backside.

The heavyset man staggered halfway across the room, knocked into a coffee table, and almost tipped over a lamp with a rearing stallion base. He caught his balance and turned with a knife in his right hand.

Arthur returned with a tray of glasses and a bucket of ice. When he saw Fireplug stalking toward Cleo with the switchblade, he let out his breath and dropped the tray.

The shattering noise didn't distract Fireplug. "Nobody going to knock me around, bitch," he said at the girl.

"You make one more move with that knife," said Cleo, "and I'm going to take it away from you and carve your fat ass up like a Thanksgiving turkey."

Doodlebug raised his voice. "Back off, Plug," he said. "Ain't no need for anybody to get riled up. Let's all be cool."

"Bitch," said Fireplug as he put away the knife.

"That's *right,*" grinned Cleo.

"Arthur, why don't you clean up that mess and then bring some new ice?" said Doodlebug. He nodded at Cleo. "Now, what's on your mind, girl?"

"I got a message for Mommy." From out of her tote bag the long black girl drew two gray wigs. She tossed them at Doodlebug. "Tell her that her two senior citizens retired earlier than they expected."

Doodlebug's nose wrinkled. He poked a scarlet slipper at the wigs, which had landed at his feet. "What am I supposed to know about these?"

"As much as you know about busting the B and S House," said Cleo as she strode nearer.

"You got me all wrong, baby." He held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Matter of fact, I think what you've been doing at that house is in the finest American tradition. It's a sin and a shame one of your houseguests turned out to be a dope fiend."

Cleo said, "You talking about Jimmy Beekers?"

"If that's the name of the punk they caught with his pockets stuffed full of dangerous and illicit narcotics," said Doodlebug. "Not that I have anything to do with people of that ilk, but I understand this young man was recently seen making a purchase from a certain pusher known far and wide for his snakeskin clothing."

"You're lying."

Yet another door opened. A lovely black girl in her early twenties slipped in and moved gracefully to sit on the other half of the loveseat. "Doodlebug, honey," she said, touching at his neck with her fingertips, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, we're almost finished, Tiffany."

"Honey," said Tiffany, "I have some last-minute shopping to do."

"Arthur," called Doodlebug. "Arthur, get your ass in here."

The blond butler reappeared with new ice and glasses. "Yes, sir?"

"Arthur, be so good as to take Miss Tiffany wherever she wishes to go in the car," he instructed. "And keep a close eye on her." He drew a wad of twenty-dollar bills out of a side pocket of his satin robe. "I

wouldn't want anything to happen to you, Tiffany." He ran the roll of money along her cheek and down between her sharp breasts before placing it in her hand. "Have yourself a real good time."

Tiffany kissed his cheek and then, eyes darting for an instant in Cleo's direction, followed the chauffeur out of the room.

"That's a nice touch, a white chauffeur," remarked Cleo. "What's next . . . two white iron jockeys on the front lawn?"

Doodlebug scowled, touching at his hair. "You're starting to wear on my nerves, Cleopatra."

"Not half as much as I'm going to, Mister Doodlebug," she promised. She walked to the door. "Because soon as I can prove you and Mommy had something to do with wrecking the B and S House I'm coming calling on you again. And then your head and your body are going to have separate maintenance." She went out of there.

Pickle watched the door she used. "That ain't bad."

"What ain't bad?" demanded Doodlebug.

Laughing, Pickle replied, "About them two white iron jockeys on the grass."

"That's right," agreed Fireplug.

Doodlebug kicked the two gray wigs away from him. "Oh, shit," he said.

Thirteen

The steep hillside was turning black in the fading day. Cleo guided her Porsche across the dusty field below the hill, parked it, and tossed the keys into a side pocket of her hip-huggers.

There was a portable food wagon, painted silver and crimson, sitting nearby. Gathered in the vicinity of the wagon were a half-dozen shining motorcycles and some dozen young people.

Cleo strode to the wagon and asked the fat man inside, "Where can I find Miller Anderson?"

Wiping his palms on his white apron, the fat man said, "Well, now, Miss . . ."

"Most of my friends call me Andy." A burly young black man moved away from the cluster of cycles and approached Cleo. He was holding a white crash helmet in his hands.

"You're Miller Anderson?"

"Do me a favor and stop using Miller," said Andy. "I don't know what my mother was thinking about when she dropped Miller on me."

Cleo said, "I'm Cleopatra Jones."

"That's a pretty good one, too." Andy laughed.

"I'd like to talk to you."

He shook his head twice before pulling on the crash helmet. "Maybe another time, sister," Andy said, returning to his motorcycle. "I want to make me one more try at that hill."

"I want to ask some questions about your sister."

Andy stared at her, then lowered his goggles. "Tiffany?" he said. "I haven't seen her for a long time. There can't be anything you need to know that I can tell you." He shook his head once more, started his bike, and went roaring off toward the hill.

Andy stopped about fifteen feet from the base of the darkening hill climb. He checked his gloves, then gave his helmet and goggles a final testing tug. Then, after revving the motor a few times, he started upward.

Cleo pointed at a beefy blond boy sitting backwards on a parked Harley. "Can I borrow your bike for a minute?"

The boy tucked back his head in surprise. "Not at all, no way," he said, scratching his chest through his faded UCLA sweatshirt. "This bike cost me a bloody fortune. Anyhow, you'd only kill yourself."

Andy was halfway up the steep incline, struggling to keep his balance.

"Here." Cleo tossed the blond boy something, and he caught it. "Those are the keys to my car. If I hurt your bike, you can have the car," she told him. "As for killing myself, that's not your worry."

The beefy boy squinted through the waning day at

the handsome Porsche. "Heck," he said, "you got yourself a deal, ma'am." He hopped off the motorcycle, jiggling the Porsche keys.

Cleo mounted, quickly checked the Harley out, and started the engine. Then, sending dust spinning out behind her, she moved out in the direction of the hill.

The bike owner's head tucked back once again. "Son of a gun," he said as Cleo blasted up the hill without a pause.

"Looks like you're not going to be driving a Porsche home," observed a nearby thin red-haired girl.

"Son of a gun!" repeated the boy.

Near the top of the hill the cycle hit a bump and went arcing through the air. Cleo kept her balance, and a moment later she was on the hilltop wheeling the bike to a stop next to Andy's.

She touched at her turban, then nodded at the black young man's crash helmet. "What do you wear the hard hat for?" she asked. "To keep your hair from getting messed up?"

Andy grinned as he raised his goggles. "Okay, I'm impressed," he said. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it. Where did you ever . . . ?"

"Like I was saying," put in Cleo, "I got some questions."

"Let me ask you one first."

"What?"

"Are you married?"

Cleo smiled, shook her head. "I want to have a talk with your sister Tiffany," she said. "Can you arrange it?"

"Don't see how," answered Andy. "We don't talk."

"Oh, so?"

"Mainly because I don't like none of her friends."

"I understand," said Cleo, "I've been doing some digging since I got back home, and I know that you and Jimmy Beekers used to run together."

"Yeah, but I haven't seen Jimmy for a year or more."

"What caused you to fall out?"

The night was coming on. All around in the growing darkness below lights were popping up.

"Jimmy started hitting the hard stuff," said Andy. "Next thing I knew he was stealing everything that wasn't nailed down. Even ripped me off, took a stereo, a TV." He shrugged in the new dark. "I didn't call no cops, you know. Just wrote it off on account of old times. Next thing I heard he was messing round with pushing the stuff."

"You hear who he was pushing for?"

"Who does everybody work for? Mommy and Doodlebug," answered Andy. "But that shouldn't really matter now."

"How's that?"

"Last time I talked to Tiffany, she told me Jimmy got himself back together."

"You know they busted him for possession?"

"Just heard about it today," said Andy. "It don't quite make sense."

"Yeah, maybe it does," said Cleo.

Fourteen

The long sky-blue limousine rolled around the gravel drive and stopped near the entrance of the vast stone mansion. A light night wind was blowing across the estate grounds, rattling the dry leaves of the palm trees, rustling the tangles of thick ivy that crawled up the gray stone walls.

The rear door of the impressive car swung silently open, and Fireplug hunched out. He scanned the drive and the surrounding shrubbery. From the door on the other side of the car slid short-cropped Pickle. He also surveyed his surroundings.

Inside the car Doodlebug, dressed in a white suit and matching wide-brimmed Panama hat, snuffed out his cigarette in a gold ashtray. "We shouldn't be inside too long, Arthur," he said. "Keep this mother running and aimed toward the exit, in case we need to make a hasty departure."

The blond chauffeur glanced back at his employer. "Very good, sir," he replied. "Ah . . . there's not likely to be any trouble, is there?"

Doodlebug was holding an ebony cane with a silver panther for a head. "Not for me there ain't," he said as he left the limousine on Fireplug's side. "Coast clear out here, Plug?"

"That's right," answered the barrel-shaped man. "That's right."

Doodlebug gave a final tug to his red silk tie before strolling up to the thick oaken door of Mommy's mansion. He ignored the large door knocker, which was shaped like a two-headed Prussian eagle, and wrapped hard on the door with the ornate head of his cane.

The door swung slowly inward. Twirling his cane, Doodlebug strolled across the threshold. Fireplug and Pickle, somewhat less casually, followed.

They were in an oval foyer. It was paneled in rich dark wood. A few small paintings decorated the walls, one of the Berchtesgaden at twilight, another a still life of Gestapo hand weapons.

The oak front door closed to reveal a large, wide man behind it. Across the foyer a matching hood stood guarding the doorway to Mommy's study. The large man who'd opened the door inquired, "What do you want, Jig?"

Doodlebug gave him a broad smile as he moved close to him. "The name is Doodlebug, friend," he said. "I wish to see Mommy."

"You got an appointment?"

Doodlebug held the intricately wrought head of his cane near the man's broad face. He squeezed something on the staff of the cane. A five-inch blade

flicked out of the mouth of the panther. It came within a quarter of an inch of touching the big man's flat nose. "This is my appointment, dude."

"Uh," said the man. He swallowed once, then turned his head carefully to look at his partner. "Show Mr. Doodlebug into Mommy's den, Ed."

Ed obliged, opening the study door.

From out of the room beyond came an annoyed bellow. "Who's letting that draft in on my conference?"

"A . . . a gentleman to see you," explained Ed.

The tromping of boots sounded on hardwood. "What the hell do you mean, a gentleman . . . ?"

"He's certainly right in his appraisal, Mommy." Doodlebug brushed by the guard to confront Mommy.

The enormous woman stopped still, staring at the white-suited Doodlebug. After a few seconds she managed a small smile. "Well, it's certainly nice to have you pay a call," she said. "Though I do wish you'd have called in advance."

"I got major events to talk about." Doodlebug strolled across the room and seated himself in a soft chair. "Come on in here, you clowns."

Pickle and Fireplug had been hesitating in the doorway. They entered now, slowly, stationing themselves against the wall.

Baby Tony eyed them. He was in a chair over near the desk.

Zap was sprawled on the rug, tinkering with a Luger. "Either of you guys like Almond Joy?" he asked Doodlebug's pair of henchmen. "I still got about—"

"What brings you here?" Mommy interrupted him. She climbed into her throne-like chair and smiled down at him.

Just to the rear of the chair stood the lovely blonde Eva. "Shall I bring refreshments, Mommy?"

"Not yet, dear."

Doodlebug planted his cane firmly in the rug and folded his hands over the handle. The blade had been retracted. "I ain't satisfied," he said up at the enormous woman.

"Not satisfied?" A frown crossed her brow. "Not satisfied with what, Doodlebug?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I'm not satisfied with nothing. So I am here to tender my resignation, like they say."

"That's right," said Fireplug in a very low voice. "That's right."

"But, Doodlebug," said Mommy, patting her red hair, "I've always considered you one of my best soldiers."

"Well, this soldier is going over the hill," answered the black man. "I'm going to open up an army of my own."

Mommy's big hands tightened on the arms of her chair. "Now, you know very well I can't let you do that," she said in a reasonable voice. "What good would I be to my troops if I didn't provide leadership?"

"Plug." Doodlebug gestured at his minion.

"This ain't a gun," said Fireplug quickly as he reached inside his coat. He brought out the two gray wigs Cleo had left and crossed carefully over to his boss.

Doodlebug grabbed the wigs and flung them toward Mommy. "Here's some of your leadership!" he told her. "You going to lead us right down the toilet is where you going to lead us."

"Now, *Doodle*. . . ." Her hands gripped tighter on the chair arms.

"Now, *Mommy*," he said back at her. "You start fucking around with the B and S House and that brought Miss Cleopatra Jones right smack back into our midst. That's real smart."

"I can deal with that bitch," Mommy assured him.

"Oh yeah? You've had . . . I don't know . . . leventy million chances since she got back. But she's still wiggling her ass all over town, and those cheap thugs you employ are piling up on the cooling board."

"Now, Doodle, let's not say anything we'll be sorry for later," said Mommy, her voice still calm. "We're reasonable people, you and I. Let's try to work this all out to everyone's satisfaction."

"Nope," said Doodlebug. "Because what I like even less than you causing Cleopatra to come back . . . what I like even *less* is the kind of money deal I been getting."

"We've been splitting fair with you. I don't have the actual figures at my fingertips, but I can call my bookkeeper in and. . . ."

"No need of that. The split is 85–15. With expenses coming out of the 15 percent. I don't need to tell you who gets the short end."

Mommy lifted her hands off the chair arms, flexing her fat fingers. "Listen, Doodlebug," she said, smiling at him, leaning toward him, "wouldn't it be better to stay on as a general in my army? A general with, let's say, 25 percent from now on."

"Twenty-five percent of what? When Cleo gets through with you, you going to wind up with plenty of nothing."

"I told you I'm not concerned over Cleopatra Jones. She'll be taken care of."

"I don't think you're no match for her." He got up. "To reiterate my point, Mommy . . . I quit." He pointed the tip of his cane at her. "In other words, it's finished, through, *fini*. So *arrivederci,* Mommy. Pickle, Plug, let's go."

The two of them joined him at the door.

"Wait now, Doodlebug," called Mommy.

With the doorknob in his hand, Doodlebug told her, "Oh, and, by the way . . . if any of your army tries to mess with any of my army . . . well, you going to wind up with a lot of army surplus on your hands."

"That's right," said Fireplug.

Fifteen

The road snaked through the hills. The warm early evening wind came swooping down across the dry scrub to swipe at Cleo. She took the Porsche around one more twist in the canyon road, and the lights of the valley she'd just left were cut off from view. The car roared ahead, its headlights, drilling a path through the thick darkness.

Cleo hunched her shoulders and leaned back. She lifted her dark glasses off with one hand, then massaged at the shadowy spots beneath her eyes.

A half-dozen large moths flew across her path, and one of them died against the windshield with a tiny splat.

Picking up the car phone she said, "Hi, this is KG 12788. Will you connect me with 626-0799, please."

"Sure thing, Miss Jones. Hang on a sec."

After a moment, old Mrs. Johnson answered. "Mrs.

Johnson's Old-Fashioned Down Home Restaurant. Tonight's special is pigs in a blanket."

"I thought it was ribs."

"Oh, the ribs is long gone," answered the old woman. "How you doing, Cleo, honey?"

"Just fine," she said. There was a sudden dip in the road, and her Porsche floated for a few seconds. "Have your boys called in yet asking for me?"

"'Bout twenty minutes ago. They said they'd try again in a half an hour. You got a message for them?"

"Yeah, ask them to meet me at Art's in. . . ." She glanced at the glowing dial of her wrist watch. "Oh, make it about an hour. I want to grab a shower."

Mrs. Johnson giggled. "Is this shower business or pleasure, honey?"

"Well, I'm all alone," said Cleo. "I guess it's business."

"You finding out what's going on?"

"I'm not completely sure, but I think maybe it's the old Trojan Horse routine."

"Put a couple bucks on that horse for me, child. Bye."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Johnson."

Art was bent over the counter showing one of his scrapbooks to a middle-sized dark man. "Now, of course I wore my hair different then," Art said. "That's, for one thing, because I had a lot more of it. Here I am doing the splits, which was always the finish of my "TV Mama with the Big Wide Screen" number."

"I see," said Gary Mesmer, making a mark in his notebook. He gave another look at the door.

Over in one of the booths sat the Johnson brothers, facing each other. Matthew, the larger of the two, was

working on a chili burger. He said to his brother, "Sure you don't want to have nothing to eat while we're waiting for Cleo to show?"

Melvin shook his large head. "I been having funny feelings in my stomach lately," he said. "I think maybe I'll change my diet—go in for health food. You know, organic stuff."

"Do they have organic chili?"

"I guess they got organic everything, if you look hard enough."

"That's all just a fad," said Matthew. "Anyhow, I eat the same as what you eat, and I got no funny feelings in my . . . here she is." He waved with his free hand. "Hello, Cleo."

Cleo had changed into a fawn-colored pants suit. She gave the impression she wasn't wearing anything beneath the taut jacket. "Evening, all." She slid in beside Melvin. "What's that in your hand, Matthew?"

"The remains of a chili burger. Want me to order you one?"

"No, thanks." Her nose wrinkled. "Have you guys come up with anything on Sergeant Purdy?"

Matthew nodded at his brother.

"He's red, white, and blue," said Melvin.

"Meaning?"

"Red neck, white bread, and blue movies," amplified the big Johnson boy.

"Yeah, sounds like him," said Cleo. "Anything else?"

"We hear maybe he's not above making a little extra dough on the side," said Melvin.

Matthew swallowed the last of his chili burger. "There are rumors Purdy had a pretty good payoff

route set up for himself in the last division he worked out of."

"And," picked up Melvin, "street opinion is that he's working his little red neck off to get the same thing going for himself around here."

"Okay," said the long black girl. "I think you better start tailing him for a while."

"Yeah, we can do that," said Matthew.

"Whatever he does, wherever he goes," the girl said, "I want you to keep tabs. And be careful, you hear. I don't think Purdy's too smart, but he's mean."

Melvin said, "We can deal with that."

"But be cool, I'm after more than just Purdy."

Scooping up a dollop of chili sauce with a taco chip, Matthew said, "Cleo, there's a guy over there looking at you funny every now and then."

"What's wrong with that?" asked his brother. "Everybody does that. I've been known to do it myself on occasion."

"Not that kind of look," Matthew said. "Know the guy, Cleo?"

After a second she turned to look casually in the direction of the counter. She studied Mesmer briefly. "Never saw him before in all my born days," she said. "Seems a little too upright to be working for Mommy."

"And not nasty enough to be a plainclothes cop," said Matthew.

"Here's where I used to strip to the waist," Art was telling the *News* writer. "I always saved that for the finale, because all the little chicks in the audience went crazy from that point on."

Cleo left the booth and walked up to the counter. Stopping beside Mesmer's stool, she said, "You looked

like you were getting ready to say something to me," she told him. "Anything special?"

"My name's Gary Mesmer," he said. "I'm with *News Magazine* and we're planning to. . . ."

"You better unplan," she said. "I don't give out interviews, and I hold fewer press conferences even than Nixon."

"Seems to me," said Mesmer, "it might be helpful to you if you let me at least . . ."

"I don't need your kind of help—slick paper help."

"Look," persisted Mesmer, "they want this issue to hit the stands in less than a month. Our West Coast edition alone has a circulation of over three million. *News* still has some influence on the people around here. An article on you might help save your B and S House."

"What do you know about B and S?"

"So far, only what I read in the clip files," admitted the reporter. "But I've only started digging."

Cleo rested an eblow on the counter, her tongue poked out her cheek. "How good are you at digging?"

"I know some pretty good places."

"Well, if you find out anything about that raid on the house, about the who and why of it, I'd appreciate your letting me know."

"Okay," said Mesmer. "I'll do what I can. Then can we talk?"

Cleo shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I really don't know. It's against my policy, but . . . keep in touch."

"Thanks," said Mesmer.

"You been leading me on?" Art asked the moderately overweight writer. "I thought you was interested in *my* career?"

"I am. We can use you in our *Where Have They Gotten To?* section, for sure."

Back standing over the booth, Cleo said, "You boys got your car round here someplace?"

"Just down the block," said Matthew, crunching a taco chip.

"Okay, come on," she said. "We'll take us a walk by the cops' parking lot, and I'll show you which car is Purdy's. Then you can commence your shadow work." She didn't look again at Mesmer as she left the place.

Sixteen

The parking lot next to the precinct house was guarded by a rusting cyclone fence. "Looks like a dying used-car lot," said Cleo as she and the two Johnson boys approached it. "Shit, there he is now." This was the first time she'd seen the squat Sgt. Purdy in the flesh, but he looked exactly as he did in the pictures she'd been able to get hold of.

Whistling tunelessly, Purdy humped into a spotless 1970 Chevvy. He clicked on the ignition and raced the motor.

"I'll stall him for a minute," said Cleo. "Until you guys can get to your car."

The huge brothers went jogging off down the block toward their Volkswagen.

Purdy's car came rolling toward the lot exit. Suddenly it squealed and shimmied as he hit the brakes hard.

Cleo had stopped directly in front of the vehicle and was bent adjusting her boot.

The sergeant's window came chuffing open. The horn hooted at the black girl. "Move it!" he ordered.

Cleo straightened, smiling. The Johnson brothers were hunkering into the VW now. "No need to get upset." She bent to fool with the other boot.

"I'll upset you, you dumb bimbo," shouted Purdy. "Now haul your ass out of my way before I toss it in the can."

The brothers appeared to be having trouble getting their tiny car started.

Cleo straightened again and made her eyes go very wide. "That's no way to be."

"You got just about five seconds to move," warned the sergeant. "Then I'll book you for soliciting and. . . ."

The VW's engine humming, the car swung out from the curb.

"Sorry to have given you trouble, officer." Cleo gave him a mock salute before sauntering on.

"I'm going to remember you, baby," called Purdy. He gunned his car out of the lot and onto the night street.

"You sure are." Cleo watched the Johnson brothers unobtrusively take up the trail.

Pale blue light filled the big room. Up on the small semicircle of stage Tiffany was finishing the last song of her set. She was wearing a simple crimson evening dress that dipped to nearly the base of her spine in the back. When she reached the end of the song, a very slow and mournful ballad, she

bowed slightly and dropped her slim arms to her sides. The single blue spot that had been illuminating her snapped off.

In the ensuing dimness Cleo left the bar and moved along the edge of the room. There were about a hundred people in Doodlebug's nightclub, mostly black. They applauded with enthusiasm. Cleo cut through the clutter of tables and pushed through an exit door marked by one faint red bulb.

When the lovely Tiffany entered her dressing room, Cleo was already there, sitting sideways in a wicker chair with one long leg swinging. "What do you. . . ?"

Cleo said, "You sing pretty good."

"You didn't come here to tell me that."

"Doodlebug's got more taste than I gave him credit for."

Tiffany sat in front of her mirror, watching Cleo in reflection, rather than directly. "He's out—he's not here right now," she said. "If that's who you're looking for."

"Actually, I'm looking for you," said Cleo. "I want to talk to you."

Shaking her head, Tiffany said, "We got nothing to talk about, you and me."

"Yeah, there's a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like you can tell me what you know about the B and S House raid," suggested Cleo, "and about Jimmy Beekers."

Tiffany tilted nearer the mirror and began removing her false eyelashes. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said. "I've never been near the

B and S. I don't know anybody name of Jimmy Beekers."

"Bullshit," Cleo told her, her leg still swinging slowly to and fro.

"You can't come in here and talk mean and nasty to me." Tiffany turned toward the other girl. "I don't have to sit here and. . . ."

"I been talking to your brother," said Cleo. "From what he tells me, I. . . ."

"How'd you get to Andy?"

"I can get to most anybody."

Tiffany shook her head nervously. "Well, I don't care what Andy may have told you. Please . . . leave me alone."

"You do know Jimmy Beekers."

"Yeah, okay, I know him."

"And you told Andy that Jimmy had got himself straightened out—was off junk."

Tiffany folded her hands on the dressing table and watched them. "Yeah, he was clean again," she said. "But then Snake. . . ."

"What about Snake?"

"I shouldn't. . . ."

"No, you shouldn't, honey." Doodlebug came into the narrow room. Side by side behind him in the doorway stood Fireplug and Pickle.

"Evening." Cleo lifted her dark glasses to get a better look at Doodlebug's white suit and the handsome cane he was swinging.

"What can I do for you?" he asked her.

The long black girl laughed. "You probably wouldn't do it."

Doodlebug's head bobbed. He removed his panama, touched affectionately at his abundant hair.

"You got a splendid sense of humor, Miss Cleo," he said. "It's too bad so few people in this world appreciate a smart-ass." He poked the cane in Tiffany's direction. "You ladies been having a little coffee klatch, have you?"

"We ain't been talking about nothing," said Tiffany. "She's just been throwing a bunch of questions at me."

"What kind of questions?"

"B and S questions," answered Tiffany. "Jimmy Beekers questions."

Rubbing his fingertips together, Doodlebug said, "Well, good night, Cleo."

"We haven't finished talking."

"Is that a fact? Tiffany, you wish to prolong this conversation?"

"No."

"You see there, Cleo? She's finished. So now you ain't got nobody to talk to," said Doodlebug. " 'Less you want to talk to Fireplug here."

Cleo stretched up out of the chair. "You leave me alone with Plug, and all that's going to come out of him is some famous last words." She walked to the doorway and raised both hands to push the two men aside.

Fireplug moved warily back before she touched him.

"Good night, all." Cleo stepped out into the corridor. "Sorry I can't stay for the second show."

Seventeen

Mesmer looked down at the phone booth floor and realized that he was standing on a sliver of pizza. He shook his foot gingerly while dialing his home number on the pay phone. The pizza fragment wouldn't shake loose.

The phone at his home began to ring.

Hopping on one foot, the *News* writer made a grab at his foot.

On the sixth ring a man with a deep, well modulated voice answered. "Good evening."

Mesmer managed to tug the clutching pizza free of his sole. "Is this the Mesmer residence?"

"Yes, it is," replied the deep-voiced man.

"Is JoElla there?" He let the pizza drop to the cluttered booth floor.

"Who's calling?"

"This is her husband!"

"One moment, please."

Mesmer noticed he was breathing through his mouth. He gritted his teeth and tried to concentrate on studying the façade of Chez Doodlebug across the street.

"Hello?" said JoElla.

"Who in the goddamn hell was that who answered the frigging phone?"

"That's only the guru."

"Guru?"

"DeeDee and Bert and Toni dropped over and brought their guru along," explained his wife with sweet logic. "There's no reason to—"

"What kind of guru is that? With a voice like the Lone Ranger?"

"He's a very serene little Indian gentleman of seventy, Gary. You could do with a little of that kind of seren—"

"That was a little, wrinkled-up, old Indian wise man who answered the phone? Come on, JoElla, with a voice like that."

"Well, it has something to do with the way he breathes," she said. "You don't think much of yoga, but—"

"Okay, okay. There just better not be any gurus around the house when I get home."

"When is *that* going to be, by the way?"

"That's what I called to tell you." Mesmer noticed something was sticking to his elbow. Some little green wad of something. "I've got a feeling things are about to break on this Cleopatra Jones story. So I'm going to tag along after her for a while."

"So you're not likely to be home for hours?"

"*Probably* not," he answered in a very low voice.

"What?"

"I said *probably* I won't—"

"Well, have a good time, Gary." She broke the connection.

He got the green something off his jacket just as Cleo came through the front doors of the club.

Bruce buffed his thumbnail with an emery board. "And to think I missed it all," he said. "It sounds as though it was a delightful confrontation."

The lovely Eva frowned at him. "Mommy was very upset."

Mommy was standing in the middle of her study. "Did General Werner von Fritsch put up with insubordination! And from the likes of Doodlebug!"

"There weren't many black Nazis, were there, Mother?"

"And where were *you* when I needed you?" his huge mother demanded. "Hooligans come storming into my sanctum, insult me to my face. . . ."

"You *know* I always take a little nap after the Six O'clock News, Mother. Puts me in a better mood for dinner," said Bruce. "When are we going to dine, if I. . . ."

Mommy ignored him. She marched up to Baby Tony. "You better not bungle this!"

"Bungle what?" He brushed his long hair back, ducking slightly away from her.

"Doodlebug can't be allowed to get away with this," said Mommy. "Quitting me and getting away with it, that would set a very bad example."

"Oh, he'll probably think better of it tomorrow, Mother."

"There isn't going to be any tomorrow for that

spade bastard." She placed a huge hand on Baby Tony's shoulder. "You remember the plan we discused for taking care of malcontents."

Baby Tony nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good," Mommy said. "Gather together the staff and equipment you'll need."

"You want Doodlebug taken care of tonight?"

"You're goddamn right I do. Get going."

Zap untangled himself from a sofa chair to follow Baby Tony.

"Not you," said the enormous red-haired woman. "I have another chore for you, Zap."

Zap, adjusting his jacket, found a Baby Ruth bar in a pocket. "I await your command."

"There are two thorns in my side at the moment," she said as she began pacing the rug. "One is Doodlebug, and the other is Cleopatra Jones. Baby Tony is going to remove Doodle. You, Zap, are going to take care of dear Cleopatra for me."

"Oh, am I?"

Mommy said, "I think we'll be a little more subtle with her. Zap, you grab her and take her to the place out in the canyon. Get rid of her there."

"Like we did with. . . ?"

"Exactly." Mommy chuckled, clapping her fat palms together. "That's a nice big woods behind the cottage there. Plenty of room left to bury one skinny nigger."

Bruce was filing the nail on his little finger. "I really think," he said, "that you're making a mistake, Mother."

"Your opinions don't carry much weight in my operations."

"More's the pity," said her son. "You should have

learned by now Cleopatra Jones is a little different than the people you're used to dealing with."

Mommy snorted. "She's been damn lucky so far, I'll grant you," she said. "But her luck's going to run out—going to run out tonight."

"Perhaps," said Bruce.

Eighteen

The wind was blowing a brownish grit against the window of Capt. Crawford's office. He was standing next to the window, hands in the pockets of his wrinkled trousers, staring absently out at the dark and the neon. He went over to his desk. His favorite coffee cup had vanished earlier in the day, a plaid one with a three-week sticky residue built up in the bottom. The enamel mug he sipped coffee out of now didn't impart the same flavor.

"You shouldn't scrunch your face up that way," said Cleo as she came into the room. "Makes you look old before your time."

"It's my time, believe me." The stocky cop dropped into his chair. He poked at a scatter of papers on his desk top. "I'd ask you what you've been up to since last we met, Cleo, but I already know. I'm glad you're back, but you've screwed up my

homicide statistics for this month. I was hoping for a drop."

"Maybe I should have let that Tom and his lady kill me." Cleo sat on the opposite edge of the desk. "Then it'd be only one homicide instead of two."

"The guy's name was Turner, Ambrose B. Turner, age forty-three," said Crawford. "Been picked up several times in connection with possible homicides, never convicted of anything."

"Not tied in with any organized gang?" asked the long black girl.

"No, a freelance hit man," replied Crawford. He took another sample of the lukewarm coffee, wincing. "The woman was Elverneta Griggs, age thirty-eight, his common-law wife. Record of soliciting, robbery. . . ."

"Mommy hired them, probably," said Cleo. "Or Doodlebug."

"So far we can't tie them in with anybody. Can you prove that?"

Cleo placed her palm against her flat stomach. "In here," she said.

"I can't book anybody on your gut feelings, Cleo." He slipped a yellow sheet of paper out of the pile. "I think this was you, too, but I haven't bothered to tell the Highway Patrol. Lucky for you, everybody was too stunned to get your license number."

Cleo tipped up her dark glasses and rolled her eyes once. "You trying to hang every crime in the county on me, Lou? *Now* what?"

"Couple guys on the freeway drove into a toilet."

"That's L.A., got drive in everything," grinned Cleo.

"Couple of witnesses mentioned a stunning Negro

girl in a green sports car who seemed to have provoked the whole thing."

"Um," said Cleo.

"One of the guys—the driver of the car—is named Leroy C. Anmar. He's got quite a colorful record, too. Right now he's in the hospital with a concussion," said Crawford, consulting the yellow sheet. "His associate didn't remain at the scene. He was last seen hauling his ass out of there on the run, with a machine gun tucked under his arm."

"Colorful language you guys use in those police reports."

"You figured Mommy hired them, too?"

"If I was the stunning Negro girl involved in that alleged incident," said Cleo, "I'd sure as hell consider that as a good bet."

"Maybe I ought to have a little talk with that broad."

Cleo said, "Better hurry."

"Don't you go playing vigilante, Cleo."

"That's not what I been playing so far. I been playing the sitting duck." She leaned toward him. "Anyway, listen, Lou, I want to see the file on Purdy."

Crawford pushed back a little from his desk. "What file?"

"His internal security file."

"No, now, Cleo," said Crawford. "I could get my ass in a sling for letting you see that."

"That might be restful," she said. "Lou, it's important."

The stocky captain let his breath out through slightly puckered lips. "Okay, Cleo, hold on." He picked up the phone. "Kert, bring me the I.S. file on

Purdy. Huh? Yeah, I know." He hung up. "Kert says I could get my ass in a sling for letting you look at that."

The black girl lifted her buttocks from the desk edge. She wandered around the office. "I figure that dope was planted on Jimmy Beekers, Lou," she said, her slim back to him.

"That's possible, sure. But you got to prove it."

"Or get somebody to admit it."

There were three taps on the door, followed by the entrance of blond young Sgt. Kert. "Here's the file you requested, Lou," he said. "Hello, Cleo."

"Hi." She came back to the desk and took up the folder the sergeant had set there. "Purdy's the logical one to have done it."

"Done what?" asked Kert, looking from the girl to the police captain.

To Cleo, Crawford said, "Look, I know what kind of guy Purdy is, but he's also a fellow officer, and. . . ."

"Fellow officer? You say it like you was talking about the Pope," she said as she scanned the pages inside the folder. "You never heard of a cop on the take?"

"Too often," said Crawford.

Cleo closed the folder and dropped it on the desk top. "According to this, Purdy was suspected of taking bribes before, Lou, and of framing cases against people."

"Okay," said Crawford, "a lot of cops get accused of things. Nothing was ever proved against him."

"Until now," she said.

Kert asked, "You know something about Purdy?"

"I feel something," answered Cleo. "And before

too much longer I'm going to know." She crossed to the door. "I'll see you soon again, Lou."

"Yeah, sure."

Frowning, Cleo watched the captain's forlorn face. She returned to his desk. "Lou. . . ."

"What?"

"What I said about cops, I wasn't saying about you. Okay?"

Crawford said, "Okay."

"Bye." She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

The Volkswagen moved through the heart of downtown Los Angeles. There was glare all around, flashing restaurant signs and movie marquees, cruising headlights.

"There he is," said Melvin Johnson, in the passenger seat, "trucking right along the sidewalk."

Matthew slowed the VW and waved an angry tourist in a Hornet around them. "Looks like Purdy's going to spend a quiet night at the movies."

"Well, this is the movie capital of the world, ain't it?"

Squinting, Matthew read the name of the movie house the chunky police sergeant was standing in front of. "Porno Brothers Theatre. Quaint."

"What's playing?"

"Let's see. *Rosemary's Beaver,*" read Matthew off the marquee, "plus *A Bad Day at Hot Rocks.*"

"Just what I like, a Walt Disney festival," said Melvin. "Yeah, and there goes Purdy on in. He's walking a little funny."

"Probably got a hard on already. Well, let's park near where the good sergeant left his car and wait,"

said Matthew. "Hey, 'Thirty Six Kinds of Hot Dogs'."

"What's that, another flick?"

"No, it's the name of that lunchroom over there." Matthew nodded his big head. "We'll stop there a minute. Might as well enjoy myself out here while Purdy's enjoying himself in there."

His brother grunted.

Nineteen

They were sitting in there with guns. Their eyes, and some of the gun barrels, turned toward Cleo as she came striding down the hall of the B and S House. She gave them a nod and kept on walking. She climbed upstairs and knocked on a door.

Unamplified guitar was coming out from behind the door. The music faded down to silence. The door opened. Reuben stood in the doorway, smiling at her. "Cleo," he said.

"What were you playing in there?"

"Lightin' Hopkins."

"You're getting very 'down-home' in your old age," she said. "How you getting on?"

He swung out his left arm, which was in a sling. "Oh, I'm sitting up and taking nourishment," the big, wide-shouldered man said. "This didn't turn out to

be all that serious, like I told you on the phone. What they call on TV 'only a flesh wound.' "

Cleo went into Reuben's apartment.

It was a big room, leanly furnished. There was one long, low bookcase, a middle-price stereo setup, several giant cushions in place of chairs and, in the very center of the room under the bubble lamp, a large sea-green water bed.

"Oh, my," said the girl.

Closing the door, Reuben moved to her side. "Like it?"

"So this is what you been doing with your spare time while I was away."

"No, I only got it the other day," he said, adding, "In the hope you'd soon be back."

Cleo laughed. "Let's see how it feels." She lowered herself down. The water bed wobbled and swayed gently. "I feel like the cherry on top of a dish of jello."

He carefully lowered himself to her side. "And don't worry, it won't make you seasick."

They sat silently for a moment.

"Anything more to tell me?" Reuben asked finally. "Time's passing, and everybody's getting pretty restless."

"I still don't know if the D.A.'s going to back down," said Cleo. "You ought to get rid of all that hardware downstairs, anyway."

Reuben shook his head. " 'Fraid not, Cleo," he said. "You find out about who ordered the raid?"

"Working on it," she answered. "What do you know about Purdy?"

"He doesn't like persons of color," said Reuben. "Why?"

"I think he's in on this whole business, the frameup of the B and S House and Jimmy Beekers."

"Wouldn't be the first cop working both sides of the street. If Purdy's in on it, who's picking up the tab?"

"Mommy," said Cleo. "And Doodlebug."

"It's not just because they don't like the B and S," said Reuben. "They got us raided so you'd come back here."

"Yeah," said the girl. "Easier to kill me in L.A. than way over in Turkey, far as they're concerned."

He put his good hand on hers. "I'm glad they're not having too much luck," he said. "I think I better call on Mommy and. . . ."

"Leave her be." Cleo shook her head. "I'm going to take care of her myself." She reached down, tugging at one of her boots. "I'm counting on the domino theory working. Keep knocking them over, and pretty soon the one at the head of the line falls." She removed the boot, let it drop to the floor, then eased off the other one with her bare heel. After swinging her legs up onto the wobbling water bed and tucking them under her, she leaned against Reuben's chest.

He touched her face with his fingertips. The strong fingers gently stroked the smooth skin of her brow, massaged her temples. Reuben's hand rotated until his thumb was touching her cheek. With the ball of the thumb he traced the outline of her cheekbone.

Cleo sighed, someplace deep inside herself.

His thumb continued to stroke her cheek. Then he slid it down to the edge of her mouth.

Cleo twisted her body slowly against him. She touched one hand to his chest, while with the other

she unfastened her jacket. "Might as well give you a hand, since you got one arm indisposed." She shrugged out of the jacket, letting it fall gradually over the bed edge to the floor. Her bare breasts began to rub at his chest.

Reuben started rubbing the tip of his finger over her lower lip, softly, back and forth.

After a moment Cleo's lips parted; her sharp tongue shot out to lick at the thumb.

Reuben prodded it into her mouth as they both gently inclined to lie together on the soft sea-green bed.

"You know," he said after a moment, "I been missing you a lot." He stroked the side of her neck, her shoulder.

With her eyes closed, Cleo answered, "I know, I feel the same."

"I'd even go so far as to say," said Reuben, "that I must be in love with you, Cleo." His right hand reached her left breast and he curved his fingers beneath it.

She pressed herself up closer to him. "We," she said, "talked about all of this before, Reuben." Her voice was low.

"Don't hurt to say it more than once."

"This part is fine," Cleo said to him. "You know how I feel about you and I know how you feel about me, but it's good to hear it every now and again." She brought her arms up, resting one hand on his shoulder and with the other starting to undo his shirt. "Thing is, Reuben, the second part of our talk always get to be, 'Why don't you quit what you doing, girl, and bring your fine self on home for good?' "

"I put it a little subtler than that."

"It's what you mean, though." Gingerly she helped him out of the shirt.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "I guess that's what I think whenever I see you. Why can't it be all the time."

"Listen," said Cleo, her lips close to his ear, "if I want to have a conversation or a debate I know at least two hundred people around the world I can go to." She paused. "But you're the only one I want to make love to me. So . . ."

"So we won't talk," he said.

Twenty

Doodlebug sat watching Tiffany dress. "It's the dawn of a new era," he said, smiling, stroking the silver panther atop his cane.

Pulling on the second leg of a pair of pastel pantyhose, the girl said, "Things don't seem right."

"You're just bothered because Cleopatra Jones been poking around."

Tiffany stood up and tugged a short black dress over her head.

"I remember when everybody wore bras," said Doodlebug, his eyes on her upright breasts.

"It's not Cleo who's the big worry," said Tiffany when her head emerged out the top of the dress. "It's Mommy."

"Haven't you heard about the Emancipation Proclamation, child? I don't have to slave for nobody . . . specially nobody like that big bull dyke."

Tiffany hugged herself. "I don't know . . . it just don't seem like she's not going to do something. She's not the kind to let you break off free and clear."

"I didn't say she was going to do nothing," Doodlebug told the lovely girl. "Sure, she may try to get tough with us. That don't bother me none." He laughed. "I tell you, Tiffany, you should of been there. I had that fat bitch scared shitless. And I ain't just signifying."

"I hope so." She got into a white fur wrap.

"Come on now, Tiffany, let's go grab us something to eat."

She allowed him to guide her out of the dressing room into the corridor.

Fireplug and Pickle were waiting there.

" 'Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams' ain't never going to be the same, Tiffany," said Pickle. "You really did—"

"Let's get us some barbecue," cut in Doodlebug. "Save the music appreciation crap for later."

Fireplug, one chunky hand inside his coat, pushed the padded street door open. He glanced in both directions before beckoning the others out.

Parked directly in front of the Chez Doodlebug was the sky-blue limousine. Arthur, in a fresh uniform, hopped out onto the sidewalk to open the rear door.

Across the street a dark sedan came to life. Lights off, it left the curb, made a smooth U-turn, and came rolling toward them.

Both Fireplug and Pickles crouched and tugged out guns.

The car drove on by. Nothing happened.

Doodlebug tapped his cane on the pavement, laughing. "Relax," he said. "Who'd want to kill three upstanding corporation executives such as ourselves?" He patted Tiffany on the buttocks. "Come on, baby, get on in."

The girl swallowed in air, then slid into the back seat.

The two minions seated themselves in front.

When Doodlebug was beside Tiffany, Arthur closed the door and took his place at the wheel. He reached toward the ignition, hesitated, coughed. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, looking back at his employer.

"What is it, Arthur?"

"The agency didn't inform me this sort of thing would be continually going on," said the pale blond man. "Frankly, it's getting the best of my nerves."

"Calm yourself, Arthur. You got absolutely nothing to fear," Doodlebug assured him. "Let's go to the Texas Barbecue."

"Very well, sir."

The limousine started down the night street. There were very few cars in this neighborhood at this time of night.

Doodlebug removed his panama, leaned so he could study himself in the rear view mirror above the dash. "Yeah, I'm looking good tonight," he observed, fingering his substantial hair.

"That's right," agreed Fireplug. "That's right."

"The real secret of my appearance," elaborated Doodlebug, "is I take very good care of myself. Hair is like a woman. You treat it good, it treats you good. Ain't that right, Tiffany?" He ran his fingers along her near thigh.

The girl was looking out at the dark empty streets. She jumped at his touch. "What?"

"You hear what I said, girl? With hair . . . you got to hold it, tease it, caress it, love it. It's just exactly like a woman, I said."

"That's right," murmured the girl.

"Hey, don't start 'Fireplugging' me now."

The car was passing through an intersection. Tiffany said, "I'm sorry I . . . oh, sweet Jesus!"

"What?" Then he saw it. A huge tow truck, equipped with a giant metal bumper, was roaring straight for Tiffany's side of the car from the side street.

Stupid bastard!" Fireplug shouted. Coming at them from the other side street was another giant truck.

"Stop them, stop them!" cried Tiffany, grabbing at the door handle.

A great crunching smash rose up from the limousine. The two trucks hit it, seconds apart, on each side just at the front dors. Squeezing it into wreckage, sending jagged ribbons of metal fluming up into the night, powdering the air with shards of broken glass.

One rear door of the crushed car popped open. Tiffany went flying out, slamming onto the street.

An instant later Doodlebug pushed out the other side, a .45 automatic gripped in his hand. "You motherfuckers!" he yelled. He sent three shots into the driver of the nearest truck.

The man screamed, clutched at his face, and snapped over into the steering wheel.

From the back of the truck appeared a man with a machine gun. He started using it.

Doodlebug's life lasted another twenty seconds.

On the far side of the ruined limousine Tiffany had stopped herself from screaming. She swayed to her feet, kicked off her shoes, and went running.

Everyone's attention had been on Doodlebug, and the girl got away into the shadows. She tightened her wrap around her and noticed it was speckled with bright splashes of blood. She kept running.

Baby Tony emerged from one of the big tow trucks. He took a look into the twisted limousine. "All dead in there," he said. He walked over and looked down at Doodlebug. "This one, too."

"We got them all," chuckled the man who'd used the machine gun.

Baby Tony frowned, touching his long hair. "Wait a minute. Where's the broad?"

"What broad?"

"This guy's broad. The spade chick, the singer. Where'd she go?"

"I don't know. I didn't see her. You sure she was. . . ."

"She was in the damn limo when they left the club."

Sirens were commencing to sound not too far off.

"We better depart," suggested the machine-gun man.

"Yeah, okay." Smiling, Baby Tony reached down to pick up Doodlebug's cane. "Make a nice souvenir."

Twenty-one

Men were sleeping in doorways, tattered men with scuffed underwater faces. Empty wine bottles, shrouded in crumpled paper bags, were sprawled on the dingy apartment-house steps with the huddled men. The night air was fragrant with the mingled smells of spilled wine, old clothes, urine, and vomit.

Cleo was moving rapidly, on foot, along the mean street. Up in one of the ramshackle apartments an old woman was laughing all by herself; three windows over from there a domestic fight was going on. The building Cleo wanted was two doors farther along. A four-story building, dead white, cramped between two other monuments to the Twenties. There was a single dented garbage can, recently looted, sitting at the bottom of the stairway.

The long black girl skirted it and went up the steps silently, two at a time. The hallway smelled of

damp plaster and disinfectant. There were two ornate light fixtures, each missing all but one bulb, hanging from the splotchy ceiling.

Still proceeding with considerable caution, Cleo began to climb up toward the second floor. There was a dark, woolly silence up there. She stood on the naked floor of the hall, listening, letting her eyes get used to the thicker darkness.

There were four doors on her left, three on her right. She was heading for apartment 2D, fourth on the left. The venerable wood floor boards creaked only once as she progressed. Reaching the 2D door, Cleo, breath held, stood with her ear next to it.

Behind her sounded another, very small, creak. She spun to see a lank black man striking at her with an icepick. The door she'd just passed stood half open.

Cleo dodged. The lank man's lunge carried him by her. She grabbed out at his wrist and brought it down hard over her knee.

"Hey, shit!" the man cried, dropping the icepick.

The girl kept hold of the arm, twisting it around behind the man. She shoved him, hard, into the door of 2D.

The flimsy door made a groaning, crackling noise as it left its hinges and went toppling back into the apartment, with the lank man riding on it like a patient on a stretcher.

The apartment, illuminated by one small orange table lamp, had everything in one room. A sway-back wall bed, two bowlegged bureaus, a gurgling sink, a stained toilet, and a crusty hotplate sitting on top of a mildewed steamer trunk.

"What's wrong with you, girl?" complained the

lank man. "Why can't you simply open a door like a normal person?" He unfolded himself from the door and tried to stand.

Cleo bent, clutched his shirt front, and yanked him upright.

That caused him to go wobbling around in tight circles for a moment. "Shit, you got me all woozy." He steadied himself with a hand against the bedstead. "What you coming down on me for, anyhow? I was just protecting my house and home. You come sneaking around my door at all hours, jumping bad with n.e just because. . . ."

"Snake," said Cleo, "I want to talk to you about business."

The black man rubbed at his elbow, then his knee. "What you mean, business? I ain't in no business." He backed from her and dropped down on the sagging bed.

"I don't have much time for crap, Snake." She strode toward him.

Snake swung his feet up, went rolling across the bed, and landed on the other side with it between them. "You think I'd be living in this shit-hole if I was in business, girl?"

Cleo climbed right over the unmade bed. "Let's start having our talk."

"Well, listen," said Snake. "I used to be in business, but I ain't no more. You go ask anybody you want to. They'll all tell you the same . . . Snake ain't in business no more." He looked into her eyes, then away. "Okay, I'm in business in a very small way. But nothing heavy, you know, just some light shit."

"There isn't no light shit, brother Snake."

"Sure there is. You know—grass, pills, a few poppers."

"Where's your stash?"

"I tell you I'm dry, girl."

"Uh-huh." Cleo left him backed against the tacky wall and walked to the nearest bureau. Starting at the top, she pulled each drawer out, turned it upside down, and shook it.

"Hey, shit, that's all my personal belongings."

When Cleo finished the bureau, she went to the small closet. Clothes came flying out.

"I got that stuff out of the dry cleaners this morning. Go easy," said Snake. "Hey, don't mess up my shoes. Hey, shit, don't break the high heels off."

Dropping the shoes, she reached back into the closet and brought out a shoebox. From the box she lifted a bag of heroin. "Well, well."

"Where'd that come from? You must of planted that," accused Snake. "The last time I looked in that box there wasn't nothing but shoe polish in it."

"Looks like you don't know shit from Shinola, Snake."

Snake shook his narrow head. "You ain't going to get away with this."

Cleo faced him, the heroin bag clutched in her left hand. "You're in trouble, Snake, bad trouble."

"Give me a break, now, Cleo. I couldn't stand to get busted no more."

"Answer a couple of questions for me, then."

"Okay, okay, anything."

"Have you made a sale to Jimmy Beekers lately?"

"Hell, no," answered Snake. "That guy's cleaner than a Boy Scout since he took up with Reuben and all those B and S dudes."

"Who told you to stick me?"

"Nobody. I just. . . ."

"Who told you?"

"Well," answered Snake, "it was Pickle, Cleo. He told me you was out to get me and I better get you first."

Cleo asked, "Who planted that stuff on Jimmy?"

"I don't know," said Snake. "I heard maybe somebody set him up, but I don't have no names. Honest to God, Cleo."

She nodded, walked around the bed, and stood over the toilet. She dropped the heroin in and kicked the flush lever with a booted foot.

Snake came running. He jammed his hand into the bowl, making a grab for the bag. He was too late. "Hey, shit," he said, rising up and wiping his hand off on his pants leg, "you crazy, girl?"

Cleo placed a hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me, Snake, and pay real good attention," she said. "You better get yourself a brand-new career, starting right now. Because if I ever hear of you selling so much as a cough drop. . . ." Leaving the sentence unfinished, she walked out of the room.

Just before she reached the stairway, Cleo noticed it was darker down below. She took two steps farther, then her leg hit a trip wire strung across the top of the stairs.

She reached out, caught hold of nothing, and went tumbling down into the blackness.

Twenty-two

Evo "Charlie the Piano Tuner" Zanzara gripped the Chianti bottle between his knees. The cork made a small sputtering pop as he drew it out with the corkscrew clutched in his single hand.

The bulky young man held out a wineglass. His glass was filled.

Pouring himself a nightcap, the ancient Zanzara asked, "When did this happen?" He took a tiny sip of red wine, left his chair, and walked to the French windows of the living room.

"An hour ago."

Fresh wrinkles joined the multitude already on the old man's face. "How many of these colored people got killed?"

"Three," answered the young man. "And a white guy, the chauffeur."

"White chauffeur, they had?" He nodded to him-

self, staring out at the darkness of his estate grounds. "How did you say it was done?"

"Tow trucks smashed into this guy Doodlebug's limo."

"One truck?"

"A pair of them, one on each side."

Zanzara sighed before he drank a bit more Chianti. "That lacks finesse," he said. "It's . . . vulgar. Smashing four guys with big trucks right out on the street."

"The trucks only squashed three of them," explained the young man. "Doodlebug himself they cut down with a machine gun."

The old man winced. "What kind of style is that? Is that a way to get rid of somebody in this day and age?" He opened one French window a few inches and sniffed at the warm wind. "I'm glad I'm old and in my declining years. These people coming up now, these outsiders, they've got no class. Kill some guy with a dump truck."

"Tow truck."

Sighing once more, Zanzara asked, "What's the idea on who engineered it? This Mommy woman?"

"Pretty certain it was her," answered the young man. "The word is, she and this Doodlebug had a falling out over how the pot got split."

"They probably don't even have their own computer," said Zanzara. "Maybe this *is* a good time to move back into this business." He walked back to where he'd left the wine bottle on the Oriental rug. "What about this girl . . . Cleopatra Jones? Ah, the things they name their children nowadays."

The bulky young man knelt to pick up the bottle and refill the old man's glass. Then he took a sheaf

of folded paper out of the jacket of his conservative suit. "We been having a litle trouble with the computer, so I had to get most of this info by making phone calls."

"I fixed the computer."

"Not that kind of trouble." He shook the papers open. "It's that we haven't been able to use our gimmick for siphoning information out of the government computers."

"Why is that?"

"They seem to have some additional security device operating in this case, meaning she's extra special top secret."

Zanzara's old eyes opened wide. "She's a Fed?"

"We're not exactly sure. It looks, though, like she's some sort of very secret government agent, with some new outfit that's devoted to drug problems."

"Can't you get any better leads on who she works for?"

"There's a former agent for one of the clandestine branches of the FBI who might be willing to tell."

"So pay him and ask him."

"He just got sent up for bugging the Democratic headquarters in Sarasota, Florida," said the young man. "We're putting one of our prison agents on it."

"Tell me what you do know about this Jones girl."

"She's been carrying on a kind of one-woman purge on the drug trade. Burned up hundreds of acres of opium poppies over in Turkey. Thinking, so scuttlebutt tells us, about doing the same thing in the Golden Triangle in Asia."

The old man nodded over his wine glass. "That's a

part of what you call this Women's Liberation. One young girl making so much trouble for everybody."

"Not only that," continued the bulky young man. "Most of our sources give her credit for breaking up the Oaxala Connection singlehanded and for helping smash the Czestochowa Connection."

"I was wondering who did that." Zanzara was back at the open window. "Okay, give me all the facts and figures, and all this stuff about Cleopatra Jones. I'll read them in bed. The business end, it sounds good. But I don't know about this Jones girl."

Mommy gave a gloating laugh when she jabbed at the wall map. "Right here, was it?"

Baby Tony squinted, then said, "A little bit closer to the other corner."

The enormous woman was using the cane with the panther head for a pointer. "Right precisely there, then," she said. "*Arrivederci* to you, Doodlebug. That'll teach them to stay in line."

"Bit excessive," remarked Bruce, in lemon-yellow pajamas and a pale gold bathrobe.

His mother ignored him. "They all got it right on this spot." She whapped the street intersection once more. "Doodlebug, Pickle, Fireplug, that fancy-pants car driver, and that singing mistress of Doodle's."

Baby Tony coughed without opening his mouth.

Mommy wheeled round. "Something?"

"Nothing important," the fat thug assured her.

"What, what?"

"Don't scream so close to bedtime," the lovely blonde Eva cautioned. "It'll make it doubly difficult for you to drop off to—"

"What are you concealing from me, you shifty-eyed lout?"

"Well," began Baby Tony, blinking, "they're all dead. . . ."

"But?"

"Well, they're all dead except. . .except the girl. But I figure she's not really all that imp—"

The cane whooshed down through the air to thump his right shoulder. "You let her get away?"

"I didn't *let* her," he explained. "I don't actually know how she did it. What we figure is she must of—you know—fell out of the car when we hit it. That can happen sometimes in an accident when. . . ."

"This was no accident," said Mommy. "This was a well-planned tactical exercise, worthy of Rommel. And you bitched it all up."

"Only the girl."

She whacked his other shoulder with the dead man's cane. "I told you I wanted them all dead. All! Not seventy-five percent."

"It's eighty percent Mother," said Bruce. "Four fifths, is eighty percent. I'd say that's not. . . ."

"Go to bed!" roared his mother. She stalked away from Baby Tony, telling him, "You better find Tiffany, and you better make sure she doesn't get away. That bitch may know as much about our operations as Doodle did. I don't want her talking."

"Well, you know, we got to concentrating on gunning down Doodlebug. You know how it is when. . . ."

She was heading for him again when the phone rang.

Eva answered it in her sweetest voice, then said, "One moment," and held the receiver out to Mommy.

"Now what? Another incompetent reporting in?"

"It's Zap."

Mommy snorted, grabbing the phone. "Okay, how did *you* screw up?"

"On the contrary," said Zap in a slightly mumbling voice, "we've succeeded quite nicely. We have you-know-who, and we're you-know-where with her."

"Speak more clearly, I can't quite understand you."

"Yeah, I've been eating a Butterfinger bar, and it got all stuck to my. . . ."

"Never mind," said the enormous woman. "Take care of the situation and do exactly what we discussed. I'll expect you back by breakfast time."

"Right," said Zap. "What are we having for breakf—"

Mommy hung up. "At least somebody on my staff is capable of intelligent action." She waved the cane at Baby Tony. "What are you standing around for?"

"Huh?"

"Go kill Tiffany."

Twenty-three

The wind went brushing by, making the window glass rattle and tree branches tap, against shingles. The light in the room seemed far away, a thin orange-tinted glow. Cleo moved her head slowly and felt coarse material against her cheek. She became aware of metallic lumps poking into various parts of her body. Her first attempt to push herself out of the prone position she found herself in failed because her right arm tingled with numbness.

"Keep trying," said a thoaty voice off somewhere in the room.

Cleo pushed again and was able to get a little way up off the lumpy maroon sofa she had been dumped on.

"I still think we ought to have a little fun with her," suggested another male voice.

"Nothing like that is to be allowed," said a third

man. This was the small, weathered Zap. He was sitting nearest Cleo, rocking up and down in a straight-back wooden chair. He was peeling the crinkly wrapper off a Mars bar.

Cleo saw him first as she sat up. "You were on the airport welcoming committee," she said, her voice still a bit fuzzy. "Where's your fat friend?"

Zap took a bite of the candy. Chewing, he answered, "He had other fish to fry."

The back of Cleo's head was giving off a steady throb. "That was some fall."

"You got to watch that first step," said the man with the throaty voice, laughing. He was husky, dressed in dungarees and a faded black jacket commemorating his service in Korea. He was a few feet to the right of the old sofa, holding a .38 revolver aimed at Cleo.

The third man was Sonny, who'd gotten away from the car Cleo'd caused to smash into the portable toilet on the freeway. He carried a snubnose .32 now. "I used to go with a spade chick in San Pedro," he said, "and you can take it from. . . ."

"No fooling around," said Zap.

"Sapped me after I fell, huh?" inquired Cleo, touching at the sore spot.

"We try harder," said the husky man, laughing again.

Cleo folded her arms under her breasts. "Now what?"

Zap finished his candy bar, licked his lips, and looked over at the parchment-shaded table lamp which was the room's only source of illumination. "You've caused us a lot of trouble," he told the long black girl.

"Who's us?" asked Cleo. "Mommy and Doodlebug?"

"By now. . ." began the husky man.

"Cool it," Zap said. "There's no need for too many specifics, Miss. Let's just say our earlier attempts, out in the open, didn't come off so good. So now we're going to be a little more careful."

"Maybe you've got cops like Purdy on your payroll," Cleo told him, "but Lou Crawford can't be bought. You kill me, and he's going to come down real hard on you."

"If he ever finds out about it," said Zap. He tilted his little wrinkled head in the direction of the cottage door. Sonny was standing with his back against that. "Right outside we got us a lovely peaceable stretch of woods. Nobody's likely to poke around there, not even sub-dividers, for years."

Cleo tried to figure the distance between her and the lamp and the small window behind it. She didn't think she could make it there before one of the two guns got her. While she was calculating, Zap reached into his coat and brought out a Luger.

Gary Mesmer scrawled a few words in his notebook. He put the book away and looked ahead through the trees. The night was relatively clear, and he could see a scatter of stars up above. He never had been able to identify the constellations.

Trying to make as little noise as possible, he moved a dozen feet closer to the isolated cottage. Pale orange light showed at the windows on his side of the place.

The moderately overweight *News Magazine* reporter had been following Cleo since they'd met

several hours ago at Art's hamburger stand. That meant he'd tailed her from Chez Doodlebug to the B and S House and then over to the narrow run-down apartment where Snake dwelled.

Mesmer had noticed the three men go skulking into the building while he was slouched across the street in his car. Something about them, about the way they moved, had made him suspicious. He'd slipped from his car, skirted sleeping drunks, and cautiously looked in the entrance to the apartment house. Just in time to hear Cleo come careening and bumping down the staircase inside. Just in time to see, by the light of the flash one of the men clicked on, the girl slugged with a blackjack.

He had two feelings at that moment. One, that he'd have to take some action to get her out of this and, two, that this incident would give him a couple of great paragraphs for the piece he was going to do.

Two of the men had hefted the girl up and carried her out the back exit of the building. The third man, small and dry-looking, had turned toward the front door.

Mesmer ran down the stairs and sprinted back to his car. He saw the small man get into the black Camaro the three had driven up in. When the car U-turned and went around the corner, Mesmer unobtrusively followed in his car.

From out of an alley behind the apartment building the two men carried the unconscious Cleo and tossed her into the back of their car. They all climbed in and sped away.

At first, following them was easy. Mesmer had done some tailing now and then while working on stories. Once they were clear of the city and trav-

eling over the nearly deserted roads into this particular canyon, it got a little tougher. Mesmer had, in fact, dropped so far behind that he'd lost them when they turned off onto a narrow side road. He had to back-track for nearly ten minutes before he discovered the little curving road they'd taken. He killed his lights when he turned onto it.

The countryside out here was thick with alder trees and tall straight cottonwoods. Mesmer left his car in a slight clearing off the road once he saw the glow of the cottage far ahead.

Now he was about thirty yards from the small shingled house. The car they'd used to transport Cleo was in an open sagging-walled garage to the side.

After quietly circling the place once, Mesmer determined they didn't have anyone on guard outside. He wished, even though he'd had very little use for one up until now, he had a gun. "You could get the hell away from here," he told himself, "and call the cops."

He shook his head as he worked his way out of the woods and closer to the lighted windows. "No, It's too late for that. By the time you could get any cops out to this kind of boondock, they might have killed her."

The shades were pulled down at both windows. At the one on the right, though, there was a half-inch of space to look through. Mesmer looked through. "You were thinking too much about getting a story," he told himself. "You should have stopped and called the cops way back. Yeah, but to stop and do that I would have lost them. Well, I've been telling you,

and so has JoElla, you need a phone in the car to. . . ."

Cleo was in there, all right. He spotted her sitting on an awful-looking ugly sofa. There was the little wizened guy in the chair in front of her. And one of the others behind the ugly sofa. Both of them had guns showing. "Where's the third one?" Mesmer shifted his position. "Yeah, there he is over against the door. With gun number three."

Mesmer took another look at Cleo. She was still alive, anyway. It didn't look as though they'd done anything to her. "Is that the only light?" he wondered, scrutinizing the table lamp. "Yeah, seems to be." He backed from the window.

"Well, let's hope Cleopatra Jones is as good at acting on the spur of the moment as the news stories say."

Mesmer found a large brindled rock in the dirt. He extracted it, brushed it against his pants and wiped it across his palm a few times. Returning to the window, he took one more look at the position of the lamp. Then he took a backward step and hurled the rock through the window.

When the lamp smashed out, Cleo flipped herself back over the sofa. In a crouch she dived sideways and bowled over the husky man with the Korea jacket and the .38 revolver.

At the same moment Zap yelled, "Nobody move!"

And at the same moment the front door of the cottage rattled and snapped open. "This is a police raid!" shouted Mesmer, ducking inside.

The door slapped the snubnose .32 out of Sonny's hand.

Cleo chopped the gun out of the fallen husky man's hand and grabbed it for herself. Then she knocked him out with three jabs to the side of the neck.

Meanwhile, Mesmer had thrown himself on top of Sonny's weapon. He got hold of it and jumped to his feet. There was enough moonlight coming in the open door to show him where Sonny had stumbled. "Up," ordered Mesmer. "Lock your hands behind your head, or something."

Across the room a door slammed.

"The little one is splitting," said Cleo. She vaulted over the sofa.

When she got outside in the night, the Camaro was already squealing, rear end first, out of the lean-to garage.

Zap was hunkered behind the wheel, flooring the gas and traveling in reverse. The car went zooming away down the dirt road backwards.

Placing her feet wide, Cleo squeezed off two shots with the borrowed gun. One of them put out the left front headlight; the other smashed a spider-web pattern onto the windshield. Zap's car kept on retreating, out of range.

She went back into the cottage. "Thanks," she said to Mesmer, whose moderately plump face looked very pale in the moonlight. "Let's see if we can retrieve my gun and then truss up these two mothers for the cops."

Mesmer swallowed. "Okay," he said.

Cleo grinned at him. "Oh," she said, "and I owe you one interview."

Twenty-four

Wearing a short mid-thigh robe and nothing else, Cleo was squatting in front of her refrigerator. She had one bare arm thrust into the box and was feeling around for the plastic jug of tomato juice. Outside in the hot, dry morning a few birds were singing in the few trees.

Cleo's fingertips located the juice as the wall phone rang. Straightening, the jug cradled beside her left breast, she picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Persistence pays off," said Melvin Johnson.

"Is that the thought for the day?"

"We been birddogging buddy Purdy more or less continuous since last evening," Melvin went on. "With time out for hot dogs and tacos for brother Matthew. Come on over to 362 South Vermont soon as you can."

"What you got?"

"Something on Purdy," answered Melvin. "If you want to bring Captain Crawford, might be a good idea. See you soon?"

"Yeah," promised Cleo.

She broke the connection, then dialed Crawford's precinct house. While she was waiting for the desk man to answer, she stretched to catch a glass out of the drying rack beside the sink. Holding the phone between ear and shoulder, she poured a glass of tomato juice for herself. She took a little in and made a lip-puckering face. "Now, who went and mixed vodka in there?"

"Huh?"

"This is Cleopatra Jones. Tell Captain Crawford to meet me at 362 South Vermont soon as he can. It's urgent."

"Okay, but what. . . ?"

She hung up, drank down the glass of juice, and shrugged out of her robe. Naked, she hurried into the bedroom to dress.

Mommy was out in her garden trampling flowers. It scared all the birds up out of the decorative cypress trees.

From a nearby stone bench Eva said, "Such a shame to ruin all the lovely blooms."

This morning the enormous red-haired woman was back to flourishing her swagger stick. Cringing on the flagstone path that wound through the sprawling gardens was the weather-beaten Zap. "I placed my faith in you," growled Mommy, kicking at petals and green leaves as she paced. "You proved to be a weak vessel."

"I thought it was John Law busting in," Zap explained. He began unwrapping a Mound bar.

"Schmuck!" Mommy's stick swished through the warm air to snap the candy from his hands.

The two separate coconut bars and the dark-brown cardboard tray spun away. "The goddamn door came busting in," said Zap. "It gave me the impression we were surrounded. My first thought was to get away clean."

Mommy said, "I'm starting to feel like the queen in *Snow White*. I send you oafs out to kill unprotected young girls, and you keep bungling."

"She's no unprotected girl, that Cleopatra Jones. She's more like a commando combined with a. . . ."

Mommy gave an audible sneer. She tromped away across two flowerbeds and almost stepped into a kidney-shaped fishpond. She stalked into her office, announcing: "Everybody out!"

Bruce started up from his chair. "You usually like an audience for your tantrums, Mother. Why the change?"

"Out, out!" she ordered. "It's time I started doing things myself."

Baby Tony managed to get out of the room without coming near the huge woman. Bruce languidly followed.

Sitting behind her desk, Mommy took up the phone and dialed. When she got an answer she asked, "Can you talk?"

"Yes," answered the voice on the other end. "What's happening?"

"You're going to have to take a more direct hand."

"What do you mean?"

"I want Cleopatra Jones out of the way," said

Mommy. "So far, none of these buffoons I assign to the task have been able to get rid of her."

"I heard about it. How can I help?"

Mommy said, "Grab her and bring her to me."

"Where will you be?"

She told him where, adding, "When you've got her spotted, call me and I'll send you some troops to help out."

"You're sure you want me to be this open?"

"It's time," said Mommy. "I want that bitch brought to me. You're the one to do it."

"Okay, consider it done."

Twenty-five

Melvin Johnson tugged open the door of the Porsche and climbed in next to Cleo. Matthew squeezed in after and plumped down next to his brother.

"Morning to you," said Cleo. "What have you got for me?"

"I think we got Purdy nailed," said big Matthew.

"Purdy just went into that broke-down apartment house over there carrying a black satchel," said Melvin. "Then a couple other guys went in right after him."

"So," resumed Matthew, "unless they're fixing to set up light housekeeping among the ruins, we got us a suspicious situation."

Cleo's head nodded slowly. Matthew, you cover the rear," she said. "Melvin, I'm going in the front way. Back me up."

"Right," said Melvin.

"Oof," said Matthew as his brother nudged him out of the Porsche.

Cleo went striding over to the old building. Nailed to one of the boarded windows was a sign reading: Condemned. The front door had once been boarded up, but the boards were loosened to allow the door to open. She opened it and stepped into the abandoned apartment-house corridor.

The long black girl had to walk carefully because there was a scattering of dry old newspapers on the floor. After finding no sign of anyone on the ground floor, she climbed to the second. A lone gray rat sat at the top of the stairs watching her. It went scurrying away as she climbed nearer.

The upstairs hallway was dusty and dark. The boarded-over window at the hall's end allowed little sun in. Cleo stood still and listened.

There was no sound near her, so she moved cautiously along. After a moment she became aware of voices. She stopped before a door.

They were in there, but in another room probably. The murmur of talk sounded distant.

Cleo took hold of the door knob, slowly, and silently turned it. The living room of the abandoned apartment was full of shadows. There was no furniture, only light spaces where the rug and lamps had sat. The wallpaper, a pattern of roses, was hanging in streamers from the wall; there were cigarette butts and rat droppings sprinkled on the bare floor.

The door to the bathroom was a fraction open.

"This isn't as good a batch as last time," someone was saying in there.

"Don't try to jew me down," said Purdy. "These are all first class, hand-picked."

Cleo looked into the bathroom a full ten seconds before the three white men became aware of her. Purdy had the satchel open. It was full of guns. One of the others held a folding of green money.

Purdy noticed her first. "Hey!"

"Morning, sport." She reached her ID packet out from its resting place between her breasts. "I didn't get a chance to introduce myself when we met before, Sergeant Purdy. I'm Cleopatra Jones." She flashed her governmental identification card. She inclined her head in the direction of the satchel. "Is the Beverly Hills Gun Club meeting in toilets these days, or. . . ?"

Purdy grunted, then swung the heavy satchel with both hands.

It thumped hard into Cleo's chest, taking her wind.

As the black girl, doubled up, went stumbling back, Purdy pushed out of the ruined bathroom. He galloped across the bare living room, then dove into the hall with his satchel clutched to him.

Purdy went clumping down the stairs.

Waiting at the bottom was Melvin. He squinted one eye at the sergeant and his satchel. "You wouldn't be my Avon lady, would you?"

"Out of the way, boy!" Purdy took one hand off the black bag to jerk out his own service revolver. "Or I'll shoot your balls off."

Melvin stepped aside. "You sure don't talk like no Avon lady."

Purdy was crossing the paper-strewn foyer, gun pointed at Melvin, when Matthew came up behind him.

The Johnson brother got a half-nelson on the police sergeant, and easily relieved him of his gun with his other hand. "I wasn't listening too close, brother," he said to Melvin. "Did he call you 'boy'?"

"I think he was simply taken with my extremely youthful appearance," said Melvin.

"Couple of wise bastards," gasped out Purdy. "I'll bust your asses, for assaulting an officer, interfering with. . . ."

"You ain't going to do nothing," said Cleo, "but time, Sarge." She was descending the stairs, pushing Purdy's two customers before her. "I brought these fellows to the party," she said to the Johnsons. "They had few more arms and legs than we, but weren't much fun to mess around with after the first few seconds."

"Might as well," said Matthew. "We don't want to break the set."

The street door flapped open. Captain Crawford barged in. "Cleo, you okay?"

"Calm down, Lou," she replied from the stairs. "Everything is under control."

"These people—" began Purdy.

Crawford interrupted, "Let me hear Cleo first."

"But, damn it. . . ."

Cleo said, "The pride of the finest here—your Sergeant Purdy—has been running a little moonlight artillery business. That satchel of his is full of weapons you cops have confiscated."

The street door opened again, admitting the blond young Sgt. Kert. "What's happening?"

"Listen," said Crawford as he took the satchel from the chunky Purdy.

Cleo had now reached the bottom of the stairs

with her two prisoners. She put her .38 away, saying, "These two dudes have been buying Purdy's Saturday night specials."

Crawford frowned from Purdy to Kert. "If I smack this bastard, is it police brutality?"

Grinning, Kert stepped between the two men. "Want to tell us about it, Purdy?"

"I'm not telling you word one till I get an attorney."

"Turn these guys over to the boys outside," Crawford told Kert.

"Wait, now." Cleo left the two customers in Melvin's charge. Moving to Purdy, she said, "We're going to find out anyhow, Purdy. No use taking the fall all by yourself. Tell us who paid you to plant the dope on Jimmy Beekers."

"I didn't plant anything on that little shit," said the chunky sergeant. "Even if I did, I wouldn't lift a finger to help you."

"Get him out of here," said Crawford.

Kert led the three of them outside.

As Cleo headed for the door, Matthew asked, "You be needing us any more, Cleo?"

"Say," asked Crawford, "who are you two, anyway?"

Walking down to the street, Cleo said, "Sorry, Lou. I forgot to introduce you. These are the Johnson brothers."

"I'm Melvin Johnson." Melvin held out his hand when they reached the street.

"I'm Marvin Johnson."

Crawford shook hands with both of them. He frowned at Cleo. "The Johnson brothers?"

"Lou, I'll explain everything soon," she said. "Right now I want to have another little talk with Doodlebug."

"Cleo," the captain said, "he's dead, got killed last night."

"Got killed?" Cleo inhaled sharply, touching one hand to her chest. "Oh, wow."

"It was quite a mess," Crawford went on. "They got Fireplug, Pickle, and the chauffeur, too. Right out on the street with. . . ."

"What about Tiffany?"

Crawford shook his head. "She's probably still alive, someplace," he said. "We know she was in Doodlebug's car when he left his club. We don't know where she is now, but we figure she got away somehow. We're looking for her."

Cleo said, "I think I know how to find her."

"Let's go, then."

"I'll handle it."

The captain put his hands in his pockets. "All right," he said. "But be careful."

The girl stroked the captain's cheek once. Smiling, she walked to her Porsche.

Matthew followed. "Listen, you sure you don't want us along?"

"No, everything's cool," she told him. "I'll talk to you later, and thanks." She started the car and drove off.

Matthew stood watching the car go away. "I got a funny feeling," he said

"An orgy of chili dogs will do that," said his brother.

"No, I mean what happened here this morning."

Matthew's frown grew deeper. "I don't know. . .I just got a feeling something is going on wrong."

"If so, what are we going to do about it?"

"I'm thinking," said Matthew.

Twenty-six

The pale green Porsche swung into the gas station and stopped beside the soft-drink machine. The windows of the station office were filled with canned motor oil, sets of matched drinking glasses, and inflated animal toys in pastel shades. In the garage a hefty black man was working on a last year's Pinto. Cleo hopped out of her car.

Out by the row of three gas pumps, dressed in khaki shirt and trousers, Miller Anderson was putting gas in the tank of a Cadillac. He didn't smile when he noticed the long black girl striding toward him.

"Hi, Andy. How's it going?"

Andy concentrated on the gas hose, jiggling the end of it. "You want something?" he asked in a level voice.

"Your sister Tiffany," she answered.

He kept his eyes on the pump meter until ten

gallons had been rung up. Extracting the hose and hanging it up, Andy went to the driver of the car. "Like me to catch that windshield for you today, ma'am?"

The plump black woman smiled out at him. "That would be nice. I got some kind of bugs all over it coming down from Bakersfield."

Andy got to work on the windshield with a squeegee and several blue paper towels. He then did the side windows, the rear window, the taillights, the headlights, and the side mirror.

"I ain't going away," Cleo said when he passed by her.

To the plump woman Andy said, "How about that battery, ma'am? Want me to check the water levels for you?"

"Oh, I don't believe I have time today, but thanks for thinking of it." She handed him a ten-dollar bill. I'll go get change."

"Such a nice boy," the woman said to Cleo.

"Isn't he, though." Cleo went over to the soft-drink machine and bought herself a 7-Up.

After the Cadillac had driven off, Andy stayed out on the pump island to straighten out a display of motor oil cans.

"They're going to keep looking for Tiffany," said Cleo, joining him.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," she said. "The guys who killed Doodlebug and his men last night . . . they were out for a clean sweep. That means they ain't going to forget about your sister."

"I don't know about that." He didn't meet her eyes.

"Yeah, but you do. You know their style. They're out looking for her right now," Cleo told him. "When they find her, they're going to kill her as dead as Doodlebug."

Andy said, "I told her that. . . ."

"Tiffany's one chance is to get to the police. She ain't going to make it hiding."

A new customer was turning in off the street.

Andy put his hand on Cleo's arm. "She's at St. Thomas's at 15th and Catalina. She's hiding out there, in the church." He moved away to greet the new car

The big church was full of shadows sliced across with stripes of late morning sunlight coming in through the tall stained glass windows. The scent of incense hung in the air, and a fainter odor of furniture polish. Up on either side of the altar dozens of burning votive candles flickered in their red glass holders.

Cleo stood at the rear of the silent church. There was only one person visible here now, a figure in black kneeling at the altar rail. The girl's booted feet made soft shuffling sounds on the hardwood of the broad aisle as she moved out from under the choir loft high above her and went toward the front of the church.

Before Cleo reached the altar, the lone figure stood, genuflected, and turned toward her. It was a weary-faced old woman. She smiled at Cleo on passing by her.

The big church seemed completely empty now. The only movement was the flecks of dust drifting down through the multicolored sunlight.

Head moving slowly from side to side, Cleo continued on toward the altar. She stopped in front of the gold rack of tiered candles. She dropped a coin into the offering slot and lit one of the candles.

"I'm glad you came."

Cleo straightened. The voice was Tiffany's, but she didn't see her anywhere. "Tiffany?"

From behind the high white-and-gold altar stepped the girl. She was wearing the short black dress, the bloody fur wrap still around her shoulders. Angling down her left cheek was a wide scrape mark, and there was street dirt on her face and on her clothes. Several bruises and abrasions showed on her arms and through the torn places in her pantyhose.

"I was," said Tiffany, "thinking about. . .running away."

"I know," Cleo helped the shaky girl over the altar rail and into a pew. "Here now, sit down."

Tiffany sagged down onto the wooden bench. She fingered the prayer book clipped to the back of the seat in front of her. "They want to kill me," she said, "don't they?"

"I figure they do," said Cleo. "Leastways, they're going to try."

"Why," asked Tiffany, "do they want to kill me?"

"Same reason they had for killing Doodlebug. You know what that was?"

Tiffany nodded slowly. "Yes. I knew things weren't going to be no good after he did what he did."

"What'd he do?"

"Quit Mommy."

"Yeah, that's what it sounded like, some kind of falling out. Why'd he quit on her?"

"Well," Tiffany said, "you know how he was. He

thought as how there wasn't anybody smarter than him. He'd been thinking about it for a long time, about trying to run the whole. . . ."

"Junk business."

"Yes, that. Running it all himself, so there wouldn't have to be no split. It riled him he was only getting fifteen or twenty percent of the take."

"What made him quit just now?"

"You."

"How do you mean?"

"Doodlebug was mad because Mommy made you come back," explained Tiffany. "He said no good was going to come of that. He said Mommy was losing her grip, didn't know how to run things any more. And like that."

"I see."

"You know, Cleo, I never meant to do anything wrong," said Tiffany. "It's just that I sort of got to liking the lush life and . . . well, I guess I never knew when to stop."

"This is as good a time as any," said a voice from high above.

Cleo leaped to her feet, her hand darting toward the gun in her waistband.

"Don't do it, Cleo," said the voice from on high.

Up in the choir loft, sitting on the railing with his service revolver pointed down at her, was young blond Sgt. Kert.

Cleo sighed and let her hands drop to her sides. "You, too, huh?"

A side door near the two women opened. Zap slipped into the church. "Nice meeting you again," he said to Cleo.

Kert had disappeared from above. In a moment he was walking down the aisle.

"Here comes the groom," said Cleo.

"Mommy wants to see you," he said. "She sent me along to make sure you don't get lost again, Cleo. Following you has given me a bonus, little Tiffany here."

The girl leaned against Cleo and began to cry.

Cleo studied the cop's clean-cut polite face. "So you're working for Mommy."

"Let's simply say we do each other favors."

"Like planting that stuff on Jimmy Beekers? It wasn't dumb Purdy did that at all."

"I saw to arranging that, yes," admitted Kert. "I can be very efficient, as Lou Crawford can testify. Efficient, unobtrusive. The trouble is, working for Lou doesn't offer as many fringe benefits as working for Mommy."

"Welcome to the Purdy club," said Cleo.

The blond police sergeant smiled at her. "Right now I'm helping Mommy with the nagging problem of you, Cleo. And I think we've got a good solution this time." He nudged the gun barrel into her side. "Now, let's move it."

Twenty-seven

A high fence of wooden planking surrounded the vast steelyard. Running, jagged, along the top of the fence were thick strands of barbed wire. The dry wind was whipping across the scrubby field surrounding the place, carrying off tatters of scrap paper, swirling cocoa-colored dust.

Zap stopped their car a few feet from the metal gate. Painted on the gate were the words: Clean Steel Corp.

Cleo and Tiffany shared the front seat with the small weathered man. Kert was in the back, his revolver casually pointed at the back of Cleo's head.

Zap honked the horn twice with the heel of his hand.

Rising up behind the fence was a wooden gatehouse. A thickset man with very little hair squinted out through the thick glass window, recognized Zap

and the car. A few seconds later the massive gate swung inward.

The car rolled into the wrecking yard, the gates shut tight behind it. They traveled a hundred feet before coming to a man with a machine gun.

Kert rolled down his window. "Where's Mommy?"

"Up ahead," said the gunman. "You can't miss her."

The enormous woman was sitting in the rear seat of a retired black Mercedes, with the door hanging open. Behind her was a great mountain of junked automobiles, hundreds of them—Mustangs, Javelins, Pintos—all awaiting destruction. Leaning around on the hoods and trunks of various junk cars were Baby Tony and an assortment of other thugs. And beyond them stood the bulldozers, cranes, and giant electromagnets used in the auto-wrecking business that usually went on here.

"End of the line," announced Kert. "All out."

When Cleo and Tiffany were standing among the weeds that grew up through the metallic litter, the blond young Kert herded them over to Mommy's Mercedes.

Cleo grinned at Baby Tony. "Hi, Baby Tony," she said. "I didn't recognize you at first. I'm used to seeing you flat on your face."

"Very funny," said the fat minion.

Inside the Mercedes, Mommy was grunting and gasping. In another half-minute she worked her bulky self out of the car. As her huge right buttock brushed against the hanging door the door fell off.

"They don't make them like they used to," remarked Cleo.

"Doesn't matter how they make them," said

Mommy. "When we finish with them, they all wind up the same way." She gestured at another of the yard's giant mechanisms.

Off to the right was an automobile shredder. It was in operation now. The carcasses of the junked cars were slowly conveyed up to the mouth of the machine, then toppled in. Metal teeth went to work, biting and rending, turning each car into a pile of finely shredded steel.

Mommy chuckled with pride. "Isn't that lovely?"

"If it makes you happy," said Cleo, "it must be okay."

"People don't understand me," said Mommy, reaching out and patting Cleo's arm. "I'm a simple homespun sort of woman. I enjoy simple things."

"Simple things like trying to wreck the B and S House," said Cleo, pulling away from the huge woman's touch. "Like framing Jimmy Beekers."

Snorting, Mommy said, "That was really a small potatoes thing, a game. That's all over."

"Don't tear up your tickets," said Cleo. "The race ain't over yet."

"Oh, but it is. For you, and for sweet little Tiffany here." She patted the other girl's arm.

Tiffany recoiled, starting to cry again.

"I'm getting sidetracked," said Mommy. "What was I telling you?"

"About things that help you get your rocks off," said Cleo.

Mommy made a clucking sound. "No need to get nasty during your last moments on earth. Especially since you've just come from church," she said. "Yes, I was saying I enjoy simple things. . . ."

"Like smashing Doodlebug up with tow trucks," said Cleo.

"That was a nice one, yes," said Mommy. "Simple, effective, very enjoyable to see, I'm told." Her face grew overcast as she turned toward Baby Tony. "Of course, Baby Tony was in one of his buffoon moods and screwed up a wee bit. He let little Tiffany get clean away. Clean away so she might have gone to the cops and spilled out everything she knew about my dealings with the late Doodle."

"It all came out okay," said Baby Tony, not looking directly at her.

Mommy chuckled once more. "Yes, didn't it."

Glancing at the auto shredder, Cleo asked, "What simple homespun thing you planning to do to us?"

"Oh, this is going to be lovely," said Mommy. "Pick a car, any car. How about that Datsun up there? No, a little small. Those Japs never know how to make a car to fit normal-size people. Oh, but there's a nice blue Ford. Yes, that should do nicely." She snapped her huge fingers. "Baby Tony, scamper up there and check that out, will you? See if the ladies will be comfortable in there."

"With pleasure," he answered, smiling at Cleo.

He climbed the pyramid of ruined cars to the blue one, which was at the pinnacle. Gingerly opening a door, he peered inside. "Looks perfect," he called down.

"Are there seat belts?" asked Mommy.

He took another look. "Yeah."

"See if they work, will you?"

Baby Tony eased himself into the passenger seat, tried out the seat belt. "Works just fine," he said. "Even fit a skinny broad like. . . ."

The car rocked and its metal made a crunching sound.

Then, slowly, the claw crane that had grabbed it off the pile raised the blue Ford high into the air. The car was swung away from over the mound of autos until it was hanging with nothing below it but ground, fifty feet below.

Mommy watched, chuckling, clapping her fat hands together like a litle girl at a puppet show.

Baby Tony ripped the safety belt off and grabbed the door open. He got one foot out of the car before he realized how high up he was. "What are you doing to me?" he cried. "Put me down, please, put me down."

Cupping her hands at her mouth, Mommy called up to him, "You've made too many mistakes, Baby Tony."

"I'll never make another one. Swear to God. No more mistakes from this moment on," he promise. "Please, put me down."

"Are you really sincere?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sincere. I been working for you for ten long years, Mommy. That's got to mean something."

Mommy smiled up at him. "I guess my soft heart is winning out over my business sense." She waved at the crane operator. "Put him down."

The jaws of the claw snapped open, still fifty feet up, and let go of the car.

It came hurtling down to smash and bounce on the hard ground.

"Is that down enough for you, you incompetent bastard?" asked Mommy of the flattened mess of metal.

Tiffany was sobbing. She hugged Cleo, hiding her face against the long black girl's breasts.

Mommy nudged Tiffany. "Pay attention. You don't want to miss the best part." She threw the crane man another signal.

The claws swooped down and caught hold of the car again. The wreckage, with Baby Tony inside, was lifted and placed on the wide conveyor belt. In less than three minutes it was into the shredder.

Mommy caught Zap's eye. "Did you take all this in, Zap? And the rest of you stumblebums?" she asked. "That's what happens to people who fuck up."

"I don't think much of your retirement policies," said Cleo.

Mommy chuckled. "Game to the end, eh?" She touched Cleo's arm once more. "And now it's your turn."

Twenty-eight

Tiffany screamed and tried to run. Kert caught her arm, gripped hard. He put the gun to her back. "No use trying," he told her.

"Yeah, Tiffany," said Cleo, "you don't want to interfere with a policeman when he's doing his duty."

Kert gave her an angry look. "Listen, Cleo, we. . . ."

"Let's get on with the festivities," ordered Mommy. "Tie up these two young ladies."

Three thugs with machine guns made a half-circle while Kert and Zap tied the girls with lengths of fresh clothes line.

"Now," said Mommy, "stow them in that car there." She pointed a fat finger at a nearby station wagon.

Kert prodded Cleo in first. "Slide over behind the wheel." He gave her another shove and, when she

was in position, strapped the safety belts on tight. "Wouldn't want you to fall out."

The afternoon sun touched the windows of the big crane's cab and made them black. Mommy shaded her eyes but couldn't see inside. "Ready?" she called.

"Ready," replied the man inside the crane.

When the sobbing Tiffany was strapped in beside Cleo, Kert shut the doors.

Mommy came around to Cleo's side of the station wagon. "No more jokes?"

Cleo looked at the huge woman and said nothing.

"Not even a little begging, a little pleading for your life?"

"Not this time," said Cleo.

Angry, Mommy kicked the door of the vehicle once. She gestured at the crane operator. "Get her out of here!"

The claws descended to grab up the wagon.

As the car was swung up into the air Mommy rubbed her palms together. "Just beautiful," she said, "just beautiful."

The station wagon almost reached the conveyor belt. Then it began to move in the opposite direction. The claw deposited it, gently and safely, atop the pile of ruined cars.

"What are you doing?" shouted Mommy. "Who told you to do that?"

Melvin Johnson looked out of the cab of the crane and tipped his hard hat. "Nobody, Ma'am," he grinned. "I just sort of ad-libbed."

With an angry snort, Mommy ordered, "Shoot that son of a bitch. Kill him dead!"

The three machine guns were raised and aimed.

An instant later the machine guns were flying upward.

The puzzled thugs looked up, to see their weapons stuck to a giant magnet.

At the controls of that mechanism was Matthew Johnson.

"I'm surrounded by spades," said Mommy. She heard a roaring sound and then noticed a bulldozer bearing down on them.

One of the gunmen decided to run. The other two drew out revolvers and fired at the approaching bulldozer. The bullets bounced off.

Mommy next turned her attention to the pile of cars. Cleo and Tiffany, unbound, were making their way down the metal mountain. There were two young black men, one of whom was Mack of the B and S House, and a girl with them. The girl was the lanky belligerent Annie.

Mommy's group began to scatter.

Kert spun and ran for his car. But twenty feet short of it he was tackled by Reuben Masters.

Reuben pinned the blond cop to the ground, knocked his gun from his hand, and got control of it. "Pretty good for a one-arm man, huh?" he asked.

Kert stayed in the dust.

At the foot of the pyramid of cars Cleo told Tiffany, "You stay put. I'm going after Mommy."

The huge red-haired woman, accompanied by Zap, had gone running off down a path between piles of scrap metal.

As Cleo went sprinting after them, one of Mommy's thugs swung a gun in her direction. The gun was smacked from his hand before he could use it, by a two-by-four swung by Reds of the B and S crew.

Cleo trailed the fleeing Mommy to the rear of the steelyard.

Parked just inside the fence was a sleek limousine. Zap had shoved the rear gate open and was hopping into the driver's seat. Mommy, puffing and jiggling, was pulling herself into the rear of the long black car. The engine started.

Cleo spotted a coil of heavy chain. One end was fastened to a post sunk in concrete; the other consisted of a large hook. She ran, caught up the hook, and flipped it toward the rear of the departing limousine. The hook caught a hold for itself on the rear axle.

The limousine shot away, the chain unraveling behind it. Cleo, hands on hips, stood beside the post and watched.

The car covered ten feet before it was stopped with a sudden violent jerk.

Cleo could hear Mommy inside there shouting, "What's the matter now!"

"I don't know, I don't know," Zap fed it more and more gas.

Cleo strolled to Zap's side of the car and opened the door. He became aware of her and let go the wheel to reach inside his coat for his gun.

The long black girl yanked him out of the limousine before he got hold of the Luger.

The car quivered, bucked, and died.

Cleo knocked the weatherbeaten Zap out.

Mommy came exploding out of the car. She hit Cleo with all her weight, knocking the girl off balance.

While Cleo was on one knee the enormous woman

threw herself at her. That knocked Cleo all the way down.

Mommy was clutching the cane she'd inherited from Doodlebug. She swung it at Cleo's head while lying atop her.

Cleo blocked the blow with one wrist. Grimacing, she twisted, swung out hard with her hips, and flipped Mommy off her. She jumped upright, stalking toward the fat woman.

"I promised myself you'd die today, bitch," said Mommy. "And you're going to." She rose, huffing and squeezed the cane. The five-inch knife blade spit out of the mouth of the silver panther.

The two women circled each other.

Mommy feinted with the sparkling knife end of the dead man's cane. "I'll shred you one way or the other."

Cleo suddenly ducked, faked a move to the right, then moved left while kicking out at Mommy. Her boot toe dug into the fat woman's right knee.

Mommy winced and staggered. She didn't go down. She came charging, limping slightly, at the long black girl.

Cleo backtracked. Something caught at her leg. She fell sideways, tripped by a length of chain.

Mommy gave a gloating laugh and dived straight for the fallen Cleo.

But in the seconds the enormous redhead was air-borne, Cleo rolled.

Mommy landed flat out on the ground. Her breath went oofing out of her.

Cleo was on her feet. She swung at the fat woman's neck and delivered several chopping blows.

Mommy's big fingers went limp, letting go of the cane as she passed out.

Cleo looked down at her. "You didn't win, after all," she said.

Twenty-nine

Gary Mesmer turned the page in his notebook. There was a brownish tinge to the sky outside his office window this morning. "So Matthew Johnson got suspicious?"

Cleo, wearing black hip-huggers and a ribbed white turtleneck, was sitting on the sofa across from his desk. "Right," she said. "If it wasn't for people like you and Matthew following me around, I don't know where I'd be today."

"You're pretty resourceful," the *News Magazine* writer told her. "The Johnson boys followed you, then?"

"Matthew had a funny feeling, he says. He got to thinking that maybe Sgt. Purdy really was nothing more than a small-time gun runner," she continued. "Which meant maybe somebody else was Mommy's link with the cops. He was right."

"It was this guy, Kert," said Mesmer. "And the

brothers saw him grab you and Tiffany at the church."

"They decided we'd be safe while en route to wherever we were being transported. They tagged along," said Cleo. "When we arrived at the wreckers', Matthew kept watch while Melvin hightailed it off to phone Reuben over at B and S."

"That's Reuben Masters?" asked Mesmer, making a scrawl in his notebook. "By the way, how shall I refer to him in this piece . . . fiancé, or what?"

Cleo smiled. "Put that we're just good friends. Any more questions?"

"How'd everybody take over the steelyard?"

"When the B and S gang arrived, Matthew and Melvin went over the walls, decked the guard at the gate, and let the bunch in."

"That was a gamble. Waiting for Reuben and the rest to arrive. You might have been. . . ."

"It was a question of timing, sure. As it turned out, they got there in time to keep me and Tiffany from going through the meat grinder." She crossed her legs, clasped her hands over her knee. "Melvin took over the crane right after Mommy made an example out of poor Baby Tony. I suppose you could say that from Baby Tony's point of view, everyone's timing was a bit off."

"The B and S House is back in business now?"

"Oh, yeah. Got a clean bill of health," answered Cleo. "Sergeant Kert lost most of his *chutzpah* when they locked him up. He told all, how he arranged for the raid with a connection downtown. How he got a patrolman buddy to actually plant that shit on Jimmy Beekers." She laughed. "Yeah, there's a lot of stuff hitting the fan."

"Mommy's washed up, too," said Mesmer.

"For good, it looks like," said Cleo. "If you want a nice oil painting of Adolf Hitler, I know where you can get one cheap."

The phone rang. Mesmer answered, "Miss Evans, I really don't want any calls until . . . Oh, really? Well, okay, sure." He pushed the phone toward Cleo. "For you, from somebody in Washington."

"Cleopatra Jones here," she said. "Yes, sir, we sure did. Thanks." The pleased smile left her face. "Right now, you mean? By tonight? Well, yes, I will. It's only that . . . no, nothing. I'll be there." She hung up.

"A new assignment?"

"Can't tell you," the girl said. "None of this, the call and all, can go into your article."

"You can't tell me exactly who you. . . ?"

"Nope, I'm sorry," Cleo told him. "Now I got to get over to the B and S House. They're having a party this afternoon. Didn't figure it was going to be a bon voyage for me." She walked to the door.

The phone rang again. "Hold on, Cleo. Maybe this is for you. Hello?"

"Can you eat your dinner down there someplace tonight?" asked his wife.

With his hand over the receiver he said, "Not for you."

"Okay, bye. And thanks."

When Cleo was gone, Mesmer asked his wife, "What in the hell are you up to this time, JoElla?"

Evo "Charlie the Piano Tuner" Zanzara asked, "Found one of them all shredded and in a neat little pile?"

The burly young man nodded. "She might not have done that, though."

"But she got the rest of them?"

"She surely did."

He turned his ancient face up toward the sun that was shining through the brown sky. "Where'd you find all this out, from the computer?"

"No, it's in the *L.A. Times*."

Zanzara scratched his chin with his only hand. "She wiped out the whole bunch, cleaned out the entire operation?"

"She got them all," replied the young man. "Including most of their inside contacts, cops and all."

The old man spit into his swimming pool. "Young people these days. . . ."

"They're not all like her."

"If we was to step in now, take over where this Mommy dame left off," Zanzara said. "If we was to do that, then we could expect. . . ."

"We could expect that Cleopatra Jones would descend on us."

" 'All shredded up and in a neat little pile,' " murmured the ancient Zanzara, shivering. "You know, thirty, forty years ago I might of enjoyed a tangle with her. A conflict now, a test of strength. Now it don't appeal."

The young man asked, "So we aren't going to move back into the narcotics business?"

"Not right yet." Zanzara spit once more. "Let's talk about more pleasant subjects. I don't want to hear about Cleopatra Jones around here no more for a while."

"Yes, sir."

Thirty

Honking saxophone music was coming out of the two speakers hung up near the ceiling of the B and S recreation room.

"What's that playing?" asked Cleo.

"I dug out some of my old King Curtiss LPs for the occasion," said Reuben, his good arm around her. "Nothing's too much for your belated homecoming party."

Cleo looked away from him and watched the crowd of people. "Looks like it's got to be more of a going-away party."

He turned her so he could see her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing wrong," she answered. "I got a call this morning, is all."

Reuben took a slow breath in and out. "How long do we have together this time?"

After looking at her watch, Cleo said, "About another hour."

Reuben said, "Damn, Cleo, can't you. . . ?"

"You know the answer to that, Reuben. I got a job to do."

"You did it."

"Part of it. There's a lot more needs doing."

After a few seconds he said, "Yeah, I know. But it's tough to take."

"The job isn't for always," she said. "Someday I'll. . . ."

"Sure, someday." Clenching his good hand, Reuben walked away through the dancers.

"Trouble?" asked Matthew Johnson. He was finishing up a dip chip loaded down with cream cheese.

"The old jazz about being torn between love and duty," said Cleo with a sad smile.

"Oh, yeah, I heard that one." said the big Johnson brother. "You going to be leaving our midst again soon?"

"In an hour."

"That *is* soon. We going to miss you."

"Same here," she said. "How's Melvin doing?"

"He seems to be doing real good." Matthew pointed a thumb at the dancers. "See who he latched on to."

Melvin realized they were watching him and grinned. He was dancing with Tiffany.

Someone tapped Cleo's arm. "Hello, Miss Jones."

She looked at the boy. "You're Jimmy Beekers, aren't you?"

"That's right. Didn't know if you remembered."

"Good to see you here."

"Yeah, it is. I thought I was going to spend my next few years in some kind of cell someplace," Jimmy said. "Anyway, I wanted to thank you

for. . . ." His voice faded, his eyes narrowed. "Not again?"

Lou Crawford was pushing his way toward them. "Relax, Jimmy," Cleo said. "I invited the captain. You got nothing to worry about."

"Okay, well, thanks, Cleo." He was working his way through the crowd before the stocky cop reached Cleo's side.

"What's this I hear?" Crawford asked the girl.

"King Curtiss," she replied.

"I mean about your leaving again."

"For a secret mission, it's sure getting a lot of publicity," Cleo said. "Yes, I've got to leave this afternoon, Lou."

Crawford noticed the Johnson brother. "Oh, hello, Melvin."

"I'm the other one," explained Matthew. "That's Melvin kicking up his heels on the ballroom floor."

Nodding, the police captain turned again to Cleo. "Seems like you were hardly back."

"Not nearly long enough."

Crawford lowered his voice. "I really appreciate what you did, Cleo. It shook me up quite a bit at first, finding out Kert was on the take and working for Mommy. He seemed like such a nice cleancut kid."

"That's the ones you got to watch."

"There comes my sweet old mother," said Matthew. "I better help her carry that fresh tray of ribs from the kitchen." He moved away.

Crawford stuck his hands in the pants pockets of his rumpled suit. "What can I say, Cleo. Going to miss you and. . . ."

"That's all you need to say." Cleo was studying the crowd, but she couldn't catch sight of Reuben.

Cleo came walking out of the B and S House alone. She had a quirky grin on her face.

Before she reached the bottom step Reuben called, "Wait up, Cleo."

She lifted her dark glasses and made her eyebrows climb. "I thought you'd vanished for the day."

Reuben took her hand. "I'm sorry. I was sulking in the kitchen for a while," he said. "Stupid, I guess, because I blew all the time we could have had together."

Her hand tightened on his. "Don't fret, we're going to have more time, lots more."

Slowly, side by side, they walked toward her Porsche. "You take care of yourself," Reuben said.

"I will. You do, too."

Reuben opened the car door for her. He kissed her once, slowly and carefully.

She moved gradually out of his arms and into the auto.

Reuben grinned, saying, "And I promise you, Cleo, ain't nobody going to use that water bed until you get back."

"I know," she said, starting the Porsche. "I just let all the water out of it."

A hose was protruding from the upstairs window of Reuben's bedroom. Water was spouting out into the afternoon.

Reuben laughed. When he turned again to Cleo her car was roaring away down the street.

Who can burn up a poppy field one morning, blast out of an ambush that afternoon, and heat a water bed to a rolling boil that night?

CLEOPATRA JONES

She's a sexy, sassy super-narc, but she'll need all her black-belt skill and bullet-and-badge power to battle the scheme of the Queen of the Heroin Scene—Mommy.

A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE STARRING
TAMARA DOBSON as CLEO
SHELLEY WINTERS as MOMMY

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